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GAKUEN KINO

電撃文庫

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This novel is, as usual, a work of fiction.

It has absolutely nothing to do with real events, truths, Kino's Journey ~the Beautiful World~, or a certain high school baseball club. Really.

**Chapter 8 - If the Female Manager of the High School Baseball Team Calls on
Chako-Sensei of the Take Action Now Club
~Combatfield of Dreams~**

Prologue: Suddenly, Chako-sensei
~a Sunday Morning~

It was early morning on Sunday one November.

6:30 am. It was already growing bright outside. Though the world was glowing beautifully, the only people out and about at this hour on Sunday were people who worked and people who had plans for the day. That's generally what you'd call a minority.

And,

"Snore... mm... zzz... yawn... Beretta... Colt..."

The girl sleeping here, mumbling strange things in her sleep—

"Zzz... Remington..."

—was part of the majority. Other than her unusual sleep talk.

This was a certain room in a high school dormitory.

A girl lay on a simple wooden bed, hugging a blue blanket.

She was in her mid-teens. Her short black hair stood in every direction like a bird's nest—as usual, she must not have dried it before she went to bed last night.

Her choice of clothing were thick pajamas. They were in the style of the Swedish army's camouflage uniforms, bright green with patterns drawn in straight lines.

Please do not ask the author, publisher, or the Swedish army where you can buy this product.

Hanging from the wall were a green-based winter sailor uniform and a gun belt, presumably the girl's. The belt was equipped with several small pouches and a holster housing a model gun.

On the desk was a partly-read monthly firearms magazine, several textbooks, and a cell phone strap. A chic strap of green leather and gold metal bits.

Chirp. Chirp. Tweet. Tweet. Tweet tweet. Chirp chirp chirp.

From the distance echoed the songs of little birds. That was how quiet it was this morning in this room.

As there were no classes today, it seems the girl had not set her alarm.

On Sundays, you could have breakfast until later in the dormitory cafeteria, so there was no reason to force yourself to get up early.

I don't need no breakfast! Some cry, and bravely forfeit the meal. Then they can sleep in until 11:30 am.

I don't need no lunch! Laziness prevails! Some cry, and sleep in for as long as they want to.

Could there be any greater happiness than waking up when your eyes flutter open of their own accord? I think not.

That was the tranquil peace that enveloped the room. Until—

“HELLO~! GOOD MORNING!”

—an interloper intruded with a spirited cry.

Interloper(n): Someone who enters a situation where they are not wanted.

In other words, the phrase ‘an interloper intruded’ has all the redundancy of ‘my headache hurts’, ‘newspaper paper’, and ‘the earliest first’, but the intrusion was so fantastic that no one would be bothered.

The intruder was a woman in her early twenties. She was voluptuous and tall, and also attractively slender. She had short white hair and emerald-green eyes. It was clear as day that she was not Japanese, but please don’t ask me what country she’s from.

She was wearing green sweats with white lines. The author knows exactly where such stylish clothes are sold. Just google ‘Meg and Seron sweatshirt+sweatpants’.

Back to the intrusion.

“ACK!”

The girl in the bed rose with a very loud start.

She rolled out of bed and reached under her pillow, as though saying, who do you think you are, intruding on a dormitory room that was locked for privacy? You can’t complain about getting shot now. However—

“Ah! Where’s the gun I hid?!”

Vainly enough, her hands caught nothing but thin air. This isn’t your house back in Hokkaido. But then again, concealing guns under your pillow is illegal there, too.

“Wh-who goes there?”

The bewildered girl shot a sleepy glare at the woman in front of her door. She sounded a bit like she’d stepped out of a historical drama.

“It’s me, Kino. Hello, ohayo, good morning, guten tag!”

“Hm? Huh? Wait, Chako-sensei?”

The girl named Kino fell to the floor by her bed, blinking. Standing in her dim room was someone she knew very well. Her teacher, Kuroshima Chako.

She was the English teacher at the school, the supervisor of the Take Action Now Club, and the one who forcibly dragged Kino into the club. She was an incredibly odd duck who was by no means normal. You can tell how far-out she is by reading what Kino thinks of her. ↑

First, Kino breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that the intruder was not a stranger.

She glanced at the clock by her bed without a word, made very sure of how abnormally early it was, and asked the obvious question.

"Sensei, the door was locked."

Chako-sensei proudly held up a strangely-shaped object(blurred out to prevent readers from trying it at home) and replied,

"This baby was all I needed. It was a piece of cake, really. And FYI, it's *asagohan mae*. Before breakfast."

"Enough with the silly jokes, Sensei. What are you doing so early? I'm sleepy."

"Say that in English, now."

"I am sleepy."

"Excellent! So change into your sweats and follow me!"

"Could you explain the meaning of 'so' in Japanese, now?"

"That's an excellent question. I said that we'd all be playing baseball today, remember? I waited and waited, but I got so sick of waiting for everyone to show up that I came to get you!"

"Baseball? ...You mean that thing where people hit balls and throw them?"

"Yes. Baseball in English and baseball in German. Today's the game! How could you sleep in on the big day?"

"I honestly have no idea when you mentioned a baseball game."

"I'll tell you the details now. And don't worry about the batting order—I don't care even if you butt in line."

"Sensei, I'm sleepy and hungry. I don't wanna do anything today. Good night."

"Wait! This is the kind of time when you should be trying your hardest! At this rate, you'll live your entire life being nothing but a high school girl who loves guns!"

"I don't plan on being a high school girl forever."

"But once you take up baseball, you'll be a high school girl who loves guns and has played baseball! HSGWLGAHPB for short."

"I don't need a nickname that sounds like a foreign radio channel. I might bite my tongue if I try to pronounce it. I'm going back to bed now..."

As Kino slowly squirmed back into bed,

"That's a shame. I suppose I should give up for today..." Chako-sensei sighed, scratching her head.

Great, Kino thought, returning to bed at a snail's pace and crawling into her still-warm blankets. She pulled them up, and just as she prepared to enter sleep mode,

"I was planning to get us the special breakfast set menu from _____, the world's tastiest restaurant; the boxed lunch from _____, where you'd have to be lucky to get a meal even after waiting in line; and the full-course dinner at _____. But if you insist on not playing baseball, I suppose there's nothing I can do."

Three seconds after Chako-sensei finished speaking, Kino finished changing into the red school-issue sweats.

With her hair still an unholy mess, she looked up with glittering eyes at Chako-sensei.

"Did you really think you could win without my help?"

"I'll be waiting downstairs, so come on down soon." Chako-sensei said, leaving the room.

"I can't slack on club activities. No sir. ...ssssp."

Oh, she's drooling. Kino sucked in saliva.

"Baseball this time, huh? Well, it's not like we get a lot of demon attacks these days." Hermes spoke for the first time in this book. He usually keeps his mouth shut when other people are around, so it's only natural that he doesn't get many lines.

"Yeah. True." Kino said lazily. Hermes was right. Students hadn't been falling to temptation recently. The most recent victims were the villains hunting Inid and the villains who were after Sara.

After half a year of chaos and confusion, the students would no longer be tempted that easily.

And it was true that being a warrior of justice had become pretty boring recently. Hermes spoke.

"It's okay to take a break once and have fun in a while. As long as you don't trouble other people."

"Just have faith in me, Hermes. As long as I'm on the team, victory is a guarantee!"

"Huh. Have you ever played baseball?" Hermes asked surprised. Kino confidently shook her head.

"As if. But—"

"But?"

"It's a sport where you follow the ball. It's just like shooting. Piece of cake."

"I don't think I follow your train of thought."

[Narration: Kino]

The Challenge Menu... developed alongside the rapid evolution of the Growling Stomach, it is a chance for gourmands of all walks to test their mettle.

But this challenge gave birth to a new threat to society—the professional gourmand.

Terrified by the recurrent raids of professional gourmands, each and every branch of eatery created an information network in the main store to fight off the coming enemy. To be specific, when gourmands like Kino appeared, they quickly closed shop.

Kino's everyday life and the identity of the Annoyed Growling Stomach... ended in a hungry tragedy.

An introduction to the characters of this story:

Kino

A female student in her fourth year at the academy. (Equivalent to her first year of high school)

What's there to hide? She's the protagonist. It's not like it was ever a secret.

With a holstered model gun and a belt with pouches full of firearms around her sailor uniform, she is a perfectly ordinary student attending a secondary school in Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture. So common you might as well call her a Zubat.

Growing up with her grandmother in Hokkaido, she learned etiquette and how to use all kinds of firearms. The training made her strong.

Even though no one gives her medals or anything, she transforms into the warrior of justice, 'Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino', and fights day and night against demons—people who have fallen to the temptation of evil—that attack the schools, all in order to turn them back into human form. She is accompanied by Hermes, the talking cell phone strap.

What lies in her heart? Justice? Or food?

Hermes

A mysterious talking cell phone strap.

The one who granted Kino the power to become a warrior of justice—AKA the series mascot.

Because he is shaped like a cell phone strap made of leather and metal, he's not a very cute mascot. But many magical girl series have already proven that cute mascots aren't everything.

He is a character of many mysteries, and one day the power he hides within will be unleashed. Maybe.

Shizu

A male student in his sixth year at the academy. (Equivalent to his third year of high school)

The top student in his year, a handsome and popular young man who always carries a sword at his side.

He met Kino by coincidence and is quite close to her, and he is a member and cornerstone of the Take Action Now Club. Chako-sensei trusts him with the firmness of the ice covering Antarctica.

All that makes him look like just another good guy, but his true identity is the incurable pervert and self-styled warrior of justice known as Samoyed Mask.

There's something about his actions as he gets in Kino's way each time she tries to seal a demon that makes it almost seem like he's actually the guy behind the demon attacks. Kino shoots him on sight every time.

His greatest weakness is Ti. Every time he sees her, he is struck by a wave of agony that paralyzes him on the spot. The reasons are not yet known.

Samoyed Mask

See: Shizu

This subheading is unnecessary, but I always end up putting it in. Must be because he's Samoyed Mask.

Inuyama Wanwan Rikutarou

A mysterious student who transferred into Kino's class. There's a lot of mysteries in this story. He is a beautiful boy with long, soft white hair who almost looks like a girl. *Chikyū bishōnen desu.*

Because he pursues Kino with irritating stubbornness, Inuyama has earned her hatred. But since entering the Take Action Now Club, she's allowed him to at least be near her for club activities.

He also shows a great deal of hostility towards Shizu, but the reasons are still a mystery today and will probably remain a mystery tomorrow.

Chako-sensei is very fond of Inuyama, often hugging him from behind and putting her chin on his head as she teaches class. It's just another day in the classroom for the students.

Detective Wanwan

A mysterious white-haired boy in black clothes and sunglasses who fights using the Septuple-Gun Fist Style, a dangerous martial art that involves dual-wielding guns while evading attacks. He looks a lot like someone, but hey, they say everyone's got a couple of doppelgängers in the world.

Ti seems to be very fond of Detective Wanwan. Once she gets a hold of him from behind, he is rendered powerless. He can't throw her off now.

Kuroshima Chako

An English teacher of unnecessary beauty who suddenly started teaching at the school. Her white hair and emerald-green eyes are incredibly attractive.

However, she acts like a complete weirdo. She shows little—in fact, *no* remorse about causing people trouble. But she's very popular with the students. She's also the one who founded the Take Action Now Club.

For some reason, she is extremely fond of Inuyama and has a tendency to hug him from behind and rest her chin on his head. The reason is unknown. Because it is.

Ti

A little girl who suddenly appears in the midst of battles against demons, just like a *zashiki-warashi*¹.

She looks to be about twelve years of age. She has white hair and green eyes. She uses Mk 2 grenades(the type used by the US military) and doesn't deign to face most demons.

She is Samoyed Mask's greatest weakness. What in the world happened in the past, and who in the world is she? Will anyone ever find out?

Sara

A female student in her first year at the academy. (Equivalent to her first year of junior high school)

Her long hair is tied in pigtails, and there are freckles on her face. She is a relatively homely girl at first glance. But in reality, she is a singer of terrifying skill who was secretly the singing half of the nationwide idol, Anete Harami.

Now that the truth has been revealed, she attends school while walking the path of the singer. She is a temporary member of the Take Action Now Club. Because she is an orphan, she lives in the dorms like Kino.

FYI, she loves Elias. What a charming couple.

Elias

A male student in his first year at the academy. (Equivalent to his first year of junior high school)

His parents are foreigners, but he was born and raised in Japan.

He's a bit weak-hearted, but he sympathizes with Sara's situation more than anyone and supported her emotionally. But that's not that well known to readers, since it wasn't really shown in the previous volume(Editorial dept.: Obviously.).

He fell to demonic temptation and became a demon to help Sara, but he wasn't turned back by Kino. He just came back on his own.

He has no memories of his time as a demon, but what kind of power his tiny form holds is a complete mystery.

¹ A childlike spirit that haunts homes.

Chapter 8 - Part 1: Let's Play Baseball!
~Let's Have a Breakfast!~

"Run, run! Consider this your warm-up!"

"Argh, I'm hungry. I can't run on an empty stomach..."

Chako-sensei and Kino were running up the slope toward the school.

Kino was in school-issue sweats and a pair of running shoes, with her gun belt around her waist and Hermes hanging from it. And, as per Chako-sensei's orders, she was carrying a small cloth bag containing towels.

The sky was beautiful and clear that November morning. The sun had already risen and was shining a bright white.

There was a bit of a chill in the air. But Kino grew up in the colds of Hokkaido—the sweats were enough to keep her warm.

"Now, now! Run faster!"

Chako-sensei, who was not from Hokkaido, was wearing a windbreaker over her sweats. She cut in front of Kino and began to run backwards, spurring her on—

"C'mon! Run! Hah... wheeze..."

—and quickly ran short of breath. What in the world was this person trying to do?

"I don't believe this."

Kino was forced to stop.

"I hate getting old." Chako-sensei grumbled like a grandmother. She took off her windbreaker and began walking with it under her arm.

Kino kept pace with Chako-sensei and climbed up the cherry blossom hill, where the leaves were beginning to fall. Because the school was on top of a slope, it felt like she had to climb a mountain every day.

They passed through the gates and stepped onto the grounds.

It was before 7 in the morning on a Sunday. There could be no one else there. At least, that was what Kino thought.

"No way!"

Her shock wasn't very surprising.

There was a large carpet spread out in the middle of the vast grounds, and on top of it was a long table and rows of chairs. Young waiters were going back and forth as they prepared breakfast.

Next to the table was a truck with the logo of a famous restaurant painted on the side. The back was probably equipped with kitchen facilities.

Waiters came out of the back of the truck one after another, expertly placing steaming dishes—specifically, fluffy omelets, cooked sausages, freshly-made hot sandwiches, piping-hot tea, and fresh-squeezed orange juice—on the table.

Kino snapped out of her daze and mumbled solemnly.

"Incredible... am I seeing a mirage under the sun right now?"

She was so shocked she forgot to put spaces between her words.

The fancy breakfast table set up out of nowhere in the middle of the deserted school grounds under the autumn sky was nothing short of unbelievable. Like surrealist art.

"Now, take a seat. We'll talk over breakfast. You guys too."

'You guys'? Kino turned around—

"Huh?"

There stood Shizu-senpai, Inuyama, and Sara and Elias. They must have just arrived themselves.

Normally, Kino would have sensed them coming. But she must have been too distracted by the food.

Hi. Hello. Her fellow students greeted her. All four of them were dressed like they were born to play sports.

Like Kino, Sara and Elias were in school-issue sweats.

For some reason, Shizu was decked out in white P*m*-brand clothes. Suddenly, a single dove flew past. In slow motion, at that.

Inuyama was also in brand-name clothes. Ad***as, to be specific. In contrast to Shizu, he was dressed entirely in black.

As many of you may know, *u*a and **did** are companies that sprang up in the wake of a feud between two brothers. They are sworn rivals.

"Sit! Sit! Let's have breakfast!"

Chako-sensei pushed the members (and temporary members) of the Take Action Now Club into their seats. On one side sat the ladies and on the other side sat the gentlemen.

The uniformed waiters seemed to have no questions about this questionable scene as they asked the members if they wanted milk and sugar in their coffee. That's a professional for you.

Because the students also knew that being shocked at every surprising thing Chako-sensei did was a waste of effort, they decided to play along and enjoy their breakfasts.

Chako-sensei suddenly stood.

"Let's eat! Thank you for the meal!"

It was a short but sweet speech—the world would be a happier place if all pre-meal speeches were about this long. Everyone repeated after her in unison and dug into their meals.

Happily, and without a shred of suspicion about why she was eating breakfast in the middle of the grounds on a Sunday, Kino savored her meal.

Not a single thought went through her head.

Sunlight glinted off her silver spoon and fork as they drew a marvelous arc of light through the air.

It was like the brushstrokes of a master painter, or perhaps the swing of a baton at the fingertips of a seasoned maestro. Ah... beautiful.

Elias, sitting across from Kino, was almost a match for her in speed. Sara seemed to already be used to his pace, and was not particularly shocked.

A short while later.

"Naturally, there's a reason I gathered everyone here today!" Chako-sensei said as they continued to eat.

At that point, Kino had finished nine omelets and had ordered a tenth with a side of veggies and was chugging a glass of milk. More, huh?

Finishing the glass, Kino ordered for another. Then,

"You said something about baseball." She finally said.

"Yes! Today, we're going to play baseball together. That's today's club activity! We're going to win for sure!"

Hm. Oh? Oh my. Et cetera. Seeing as the members other than Shizu were a little surprised, it seemed that Chako-sensei had said nothing about the plans to them.

And yet all the members had come out to school so early. Such good children.

Shizu elegantly wiped a corner of his mouth on a napkin, then slightly raised his hand and spoke.

"May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead, Shizu!"

"Who will we be playing against?"

Right. Since Chako-sensei mentioned winning, there must have been an opponent prepared for them. Shizu had an acute eye for challenges.

"They'll be here in the afternoon. I'll tell you then."

Shizu backed off for the time being.

Then, Inuyama asked a question. He was also enthusiastic about challenges.

"What do we do until then? And why do you have to keep their identity a secret?"

It wasn't even eight in the morning. Inuyama's question was understandable. The other members, including Kino, all turned to Chako-sensei.

"What else? Practice! Have any of you played baseball before?"

Shizu raised his hand.

"I've dabbled in it a little for experience's sake, but I can play any position, including umpire."

That's not what you call 'dabbling'. In this guy's case, it might be easier to ask what he *hasn't* done before.

"All right. Anyone else?"

No one said anything. Zero exp.

Chako-sensei nodded, satisfied.

"Then I'll turn you all into usable baseball players! That's what this practice session will be all about!"

She'd answered Inuyama's first question, but her planning was a mess. They only had four hours to practice. Was the game really planned on such late notice?

"FYI, I scheduled the game a week ago. I wouldn't have been able to reserve all your meals otherwise."

Why didn't you just tell us then?! Kino cried via telepathy, but Chako-sensei ignored her and answered the second question.

"Your opponents are a secret because I want you to keep your guard up! If I told you, you'll end up thinking, 'Hah! We can take 'em, no problem!'. Who can say if overconfidence won't end up bringing down our team?"

What are you talking about? You're the one who gathered a bunch of newbies and gave them a measly four hours to practice!

Ignoring Kino's telepathy again, Chako-sensei looked around and asked for more questions.

"Umm... do we have to play baseball too?" Elias asked the obvious question, a mountain of sausages piled on his plate.

Elias and Sara were only first-years. Their builds and personalities weren't exactly suited for competition. But Chako-sensei replied,

"Absolutely. But standing around is all defense does! Now, eat lots and fight hard!"

"Oh. Okay." Elias mumbled, downcast.

"Baseball, huh." Sara breathed a sigh.

"More ketchup on the omelet, please." Kino said, returning to her breakfast.

"Let's eat to our heart's content and put all our effort into practice. A healthy breakfast brings out quality performance in the athlete. Glucose, the brain's energy source, is critical to improving memory and concentration." Shizu recited, as tranquil as ever.

"..."

And Inuyama glowered at Shizu out of the corner of his eye.

Without a care for the varied reactions of the people around the table in the middle of the grounds, the waiter served Kino her omelet with an extra helping of ketchup.

After breakfast. It was past eight.

"All right, it's practice time! First!"

First? Chako-sensei said loudly, out of the blue. What was she planning to tell the students, whose eyes were on her?

"First, we take a 30-minute break! It's not good to exercise right after you eat."

Okay.

The students stood from their chairs and plopped down on the grounds, which were still wet with dew.

That's a half-hour cut of practice time.

Thirty minutes later. It was a little before nine.

"We're the unbeatable Take Action Now Club~♪"

<We're the unbeatable Take Action Now Club~♪>

The members of the Take Action Now Club were running laps around the grounds as part of their warm-up. The restaurant employees had already left on the truck.

"Chako-sensei's the hot supervisor~♪"

Chako-sensei, jogging in the lead, was singing. She was also completely tone-deaf, but let's set that aside for now.

<Chako-sensei's the hot supervisor~♪>

The students, running in a line behind her, repeated after Chako-sensei.

It was like a scene out of a US Marines boot camp(also known as recruit training). Songs like this are known as military cadences. That was another morsel of useless information courtesy of the author.

"No matter who's in the way~♪"

<No matter who's in the way~♪>

"They can't beat sensei's charm~♪"

<They can't beat sensei's charm~♪>

"Don't tell the missus~♪"

<Don't tell the missus~♪>

"That there's a beauty like her around~♪"

<That there's a beauty like her around~♪>

"Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!"

<Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!>

Chako-sensei's lyrics are full of self-praise.

Kino was already mindlessly repeating after Chako-sensei, but it's a little sad to see Elias giving his all and Sara singing with her lovely voice.

"We've got a long way to go! Five more laps around the field!" Chako-sensei ordered. "Let's get mo—I'm getting tired."

Four seconds later, she collapsed. They sat her down on the concrete steps next to the school building, and Shizu took over as drill sergeant.

"Let's give it our best shot. Don't pressure yourselves to run too fast."

And without singing a single strange song, they silently jogged around the field five more times and finished.

"Hah... hah..."

At that point, Elias was already exhausted. His face was dripping with sweat.

"..."

No one noticed that Hermes, hanging from Kino's belt, was silently, stealthily, and discreetly observing him.

It would be weird if someone did.

Shizu, Kino, and Inuyama were only about as tired as they would be if they'd gone to the door to grab the morning paper. In other words, they were just fine. Not a drop of sweat on their brows.

And,

"Are you okay, Elias?"

Sara, who worriedly looked at Elias's sweaty face under his mop of golden hair—

"Don't worry about me. If you're tired, you should get some rest."

—did not look very tired. That's a real singer for you. She must be in excellent shape. She's probably got abs of steel.

Maybe he was already used to her fretting; Elias thought he should do as she said. But at that moment,

"There's no time for rest! We're playing catch!" Chako-sensei commanded, having been revived. It looks like she's only got two modes—on or off. Elias's eyes grew moist.

"Here's your gear!"

No one could explain how or when, but a cart had appeared at Chako-sensei's feet, laden with gloves, bats, and helmets and baseball caps emblazoned with the club initials. In other words, baseball gear.

The students took up their things. Frankly, this was the first time Kino had ever touched a baseball glove. She placed it on her head for the moment to try and figure out how to use it, but that probably wasn't the answer.

The *hat* was what went on her head. Everyone donned light green baseball caps. Ah, yes. Much lighter than the gloves, and they even had bills to shade their eyes. Perfect.

"Let me teach you how to use a glove."

The multitalented Shizu taught Kino, Elias, and Sara how to put on and use a glove. Meanwhile, Inuyama—

"..."

—kept silent, knowing it was not yet the time to strike.

As Shizu instructed, everyone put their gloves tightly on their non-throwing hands. Elias, being left-handed, put his on his right hand. Chako-sensei was prepared.

As for the ball, all they had to do was curl the glove in the shape of a pouch and stick it in their hands. Such simplicity.

They began playing catch.

Sara and Elias were a pair, standing about five meters apart as they practiced.

"Here goes, Sara. Hah!"

"Oh! Oh no, oh no... Ah! I caught it! Look!"

Ah, this looks fun.

Sara smiled much more often in recent days, probably thanks to that huge burden being lifted from her shoulders.

No, this was probably what she was really like. Elias's eyes curled into a smile at the sight.

Sara and Elias, having not played catch before, had no technique and threw without a shred of accuracy, but that didn't matter.

The important thing was that they liked each other and were having fun. How could they not enjoy practice?

Sometimes, the ball would fly off in strange directions.

"Oh! Sorry, Sara!"

"It's okay. I'll get it. Hyah!"

"Whoa!"

"Ah, I'm sorry."

They giggled and shouted, a lovey-dovey couple—

The very single author is in agony just by writing all this, and the single readers must feel the same reading, but I must go on.

"Wow! You're getting better, Sara."

"Hee hee. You too, Elias."

Let's leave the lovebirds alone for now.

Now, for the protagonist.

"Give it your best shot, Sensei!"

"Then here goes!"

She was facing Chako-sensei. They were just getting started, so they stood about ten meters apart.

"There!"

Chako-sensei suddenly threw, her form polished. The clean white ball flew at Kino in a straight line, low near the ground.

"Hm!"

Kino's sense of motion perception grunted(Editorial dept.: What's happening here?).

She'd never played things like baseball, but throws like this were a walk in the park. Kino kept her eyes trained on the ball to the end as it sped toward her. And,

Now! Here's your chance! Go!

With perfect form, Kino raised her left hand and reached for Chako-sensei's ball.

"Hah!"

And struck it.

The glove on her hand was soft, but for someone as athletic as Kino, sending a ball flying was a walk in the park.

"Uh...?"

As Chako-sensei watched, baffled, the ball flew overhead, crossed the grounds, and landed in the swimming pool with a loud splash.

And she nails it! A home run, folks! She hits it straight out of the park!

"Awesome."

Kino looked very satisfied. She was glowing.

"I did it, Sensei! I just hit it! What do you think?" She asked proudly.

"You did it, Kino! Now go get the ball." Chako-sensei replied angrily.

"What the heck? I hit the ball, didn't I?"

Kino sighed as she ran across the grounds, not understanding why she had been scolded.

"Kino, do you know what baseball is?" Hermes asked tentatively, hanging from her belt.

"I hit the ball. The person with the pitching mission throws, and I hit."

"Mission? Anyway, you're not exactly wrong. But that's what a batter does. Right now, you're just throwing and catching balls to prepare for defense. You're playing catch."

"I get it now! Mystery solved."

"Honestly."

"So when the game starts, I have to be the batter and hit the ball when the other team's pitcher throws."

"You could say that."

"With this glove."

"...Kino, be quiet for a second and listen to me."

Hermes gave Kino a lengthy lecture about the basics of baseball, but let's omit that for length.

As she listened, Kino paddled at the pool water to coax the ball floating in the middle of the pool toward her. She eventually got it to the edge and scooped it out.

"—and they take turns until the bottom of the ninth inning, at which point the team with more runs wins. That's about the gist of it." Hermes finished.

"Okay. I've got it. Thanks, Hermes. Tell me more if I need details." Kino said, heading back to the grounds.

Running back, Kino frowned slightly.

"But baseball isn't what I imagined at all. I thought there'd be more running, slashing, getting eaten, or killing."

"Hm? Where'd you get that idea, Kino?"

"Well, I read a popular baseball manga the other day. It was really good."

"What's the title?"

"Sh*ngeki no Kyojin."

"That's not a baseball manga, Kino. Wrong giants²."

A little earlier—when Kino had just hit her home run.

"Let's take things easy for now."

"Not at all. Show no mercy, please."

Shizu and Inuyama stood about twenty meters apart as they began to practice.

Shizu, dressed in sweats with his katana still at his side, was a comical sight. But he doesn't care, so oh well.

And as he threw with all the tension of a warm-up, the ball flew at terrifying speeds—

Thud.

—and landed directly in the middle of Inuyama's glove.

"..."

Inuyama's expressionless throw was also a blazer. The ball sang as it cut a straight line through the air.

² A reference to the Yomiuri Giants, a baseball team in Tokyo.

"Hmph."

Thud.

Shizu swung his hand without an ounce of effort and caught the throw.

"..."

Inuyama was feigning discipline, but he was actually quite irritated. Damn it.

Shizu threw again. He stepped back slightly, then ran forward as he threw for an additional burst of force. But Inuyama had little difficulty in catching the ball.

He could never let himself stoop to being a dog picking up dropped sticks from the ground. That was defeat and humiliation.

Inuyama also stepped back and ran forward as he hurled a powerful pitch at Shizu's face. Shizu again caught the ball with nonchalance.

Take this! Catch.

Take that! Catch.

As they continued, the distance between them began to grow wider.

And,

"I'm back, Sensei."

By the time Kino returned from the pool,

"Hah!"

Shizu and Inuyama were focused entirely on their game of long-distance catch.

Shizu was at the very end of the school grounds. With all the momentum he could muster, he launched a frightening throw at Inuyama, dozens of meters away. Like Ichiro throwing to home plate.

Fumbling is humiliation! Inuyama desperately caught the ball, and as though lobbing a live grenade, threw it back immediately.

But as he only ever aimed at Shizu's face, it was nothing short of a cakewalk for Shizu to catch it. Look, he's even humming to himself.

"What're they doing?" Kino asked, standing next to Chako-sensei. The latter grinned.

"I'm sure it's just like playing fetch with a dog. On Expert difficulty."

After the warm-ups, they started the next stage of training.

"Now, we'll all be practicing our pitching!"

No one noticed when, but Chako-sensei had put on protective gear and was dressed like a genuine catcher. There's no ball she can't catch.

"I'll catch your throws, so think of yourselves as the pitcher and throw as hard as you can, but to somewhere I can catch! I'll judge who gets to be the pitcher."

Of course. She was trying to see who was most suitable for the role.

"Then if I may demonstrate."

Shizu quietly stepped onto the mound. The combination of katana, sweats, baseball cap, and glove was suspicious to be sure. It was awkward to anyone's eyes, but I'm sure they'll get used to it.

Then, he swung his throwing arm forward. His arms and legs cut the air as the first pitch hurled toward Chako-sensei—

"Take this."

Kino, who was standing next to him, also pitched at the same time. Uh-oh.

"Ack!"

Chako-sensei was taken by surprise.

Shizu's bull's-eye strike and Kino's sling flew toward the same point. There was nothing to be done now.

Chako-sensei may be a weirdo and a freak, but even she couldn't catch two pitches at once.

"Wait—"

All she could do was roll for cover to the side.

The two balls passed over Chako-sensei's legs as she hugged the ground, collided in midair, and flew off in different directions.

The students other than Kino and the lone cell phone strap stared blankly.

"Look! A strike!" Kino whooped, her fists clenched triumphantly.

Soon, in the midst of a resounding silence, Chako-sensei returned to home plate with a look of utter vexation.

"KINO! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"

Kino was scolded again.

Following Shizu was Inuyama.

"You stay on standby there, Kino." Chako-sensei ordered.

Kino squatted about fifteen meters behind the mound.

"Hermes, did you know that there's only supposed to be one pitcher on the field at one time? Means you can't have two or more people throwing at the same time. Even though there's eight other people on the team who're doing nothing."

Hermes said nothing. It seems like he sort of wants to say, "Sure, I didn't say that you couldn't have two pitchers on the field, but—".

Kino's grumbling continued.

"This is stupid. If you're throwing the ball to take out the batter, the best strategy would be to deploy as many pitchers as possible at once. Every soldier knows that you have to synchronize fire so the enemy can't even raise his head."

No comment, thought Hermes.

The test to pick the pitcher of the Take Action Now Club continued.

Shizu's pitches howled across the field, but Inuyama matched him for speed and force.

There was no clear victor. Both were deadly serious, and Inuyama especially was desperately giving his all into his throws.

Sara and Elias took the test as well. Well, hmm. Hopefully their throws actually reach the catcher before bouncing off the ground first.

And finally, it was Kino's turn. She was permitted to stand.

"All right. Only one pitcher on the field at a time. I got that memorized!"

Fixing her cap and taking the mound, Kino stood. Shizu gave her the ball and a piece of advice.

"Kino. This plate under you is the rubber. You have to begin your throw with your foot on it. I'll teach you all the details later, but keep that in mind for now."

"I see."

If the pitcher could throw from anywhere, someone might end up standing just three meters from the batter. It made sense.

As Shizu instructed, and as he had done, Kino raised her arm and leg—in other words, used her entire body—to throw the first pitch.

The ball shot across the field and into Chako-sensei's glove. It had flown in a straight line into the very middle of the glove. A perfect strike.

"You're doing well." Shizu praised Kino from behind. Kino chuckled, embarrassed. She caught the ball Chako-sensei threw back and prepared to pitch again.

"Heh."

Oh? Chako-sensei smiled confidently and slightly lowered her glove. Shizu noticed, but he said nothing to Kino.

"There."

Kino pitched.

Just like before, the ball flew at Chako-sensei. And with a pleasant *thud*, it shot into the glove.

Chako-sensei grinned and threw back the ball. Then,

"That was pretty good, Kino. Try throwing like that again."

"Okay!"

Kino's third, fourth, and fifth pitches were drawn like magnets into Chako-sensei's glove, even as she moved slightly between throws.

"Man, throwing is fun!"

Kino grinned proudly.

Without a hint of fatigue or stress, Kino happily continued pitching.

At some point, Inuyama stood by Shizu to watch Kino pitch.

"Can you tell?" Shizu asked without turning to him.

"Yes." Inuyama replied immediately, a look of fear in his eyes.

"She's incredible."

"She's incredible."

For once they were in agreement.

"Hah!"

Kino's eighth pitch landed right in Chako-sensei's glove, which she had purposely held out quite far from her body. Chako-sensei caught it without moving her arm in the least.

"All done. Everyone, gather!"

The students all went to home plate.

"I will now announce the results of our auditions! The glorious position of pitcher goes to... Kino!"

"Who, me?" Kino asked, pointing at herself. She was taken completely by surprise.

"Yes. We need you on the mound, Kino. It's a very important job, so do your best."

"Why me? Shizu-senpai's pitches were way faster."

"True, but it feels like you'd be a better pick for this job. Call it a woman's intuition!"

"Huh. Right..."

Kino didn't feel like questioning such illogical reasoning. In any case, having realized that a pitcher was something like the most important and coolest position—

"Leave it to me!"

—Kino thumped her chest proudly. Then she coughed. Must've hit too hard.

"Then we'll take a short break. Let's not get dehydrated—there are sports drinks in the basket."

As Chako-sensei instructed,

"Let's go, you two."

Kino pulled Sara and Elias to the basket by the school building.

Shizu and Inuyama were left behind.

"I'm surprised I didn't get any reactions from our two non-aces." Chako-sensei commented.

"Not at all." "Not at all."

They replied simultaneously.

"I suppose. Her control was so good she managed to throw the ball into the glove without a single mistake. Where does she get such mechanically good accuracy? Is it because she's so talented with firearms?" Chako-sensei wondered.

Maybe.

The clock on the school building indicated that it was ten in the morning. The autumn sky was a perfectly clear blue. And underneath,

"Hit it!"

With an unusually terse command, batting practice began.

"All right! I'mma hit it!"

Standing at home plate in a helmet and holding an aluminum bat was Kino.

This time, she did not confuse which side of the bat to hold. She was probably considering the weight balance of the bat as a weapon.

Chako-sensei was again the catcher. Shizu was the pitcher this time.

The other three had scattered across the field to practice defense and picking up the ball. Naturally, they instructed Sara and Elias to run away from the faster hits.

"Kino, do you know what a batter is supposed to do?" Asked Chako-sensei, who had personally seen what Kino had done over the course of morning practice.

"Yes! When our team's on the offensive, one person comes up here at a time with the club—I mean, bat—and hit the ball that the enemy pitcher throws, without letting their feet leave the square here."

"That's right. You've got it."

"And if the ball hits the pitcher, we score a point!"

"No."

Please wait while Chako-sensei explains things to Kino.

"All right! I'mma hit it!"

After the explanation, Kino repeated herself at the plate.

Shizu raised his arm and threw the first pitch.

The ball flew at Kino in a straight line. It was a perfect throw to the center, neither too fast nor slow.

"Yeah! Awesome pitch!"

Aren't you gonna hit it?

"Hah!"

With a battle cry, Kino swung. Her form was pretty good.

Whoosh. Clang!

The bat loudly struck the ball, which flew into the air.

Crash!

Which then shattered a window on the second floor of the school and disappeared inside.

"Take that! Home run!"

No, that's a foul.

The home plate was placed in front of the school building to prevent such a thing. So how did the ball end up breaking a window? It had suddenly made a right-angle turn in midair.

"Kino..."

Chako-sensei raised her mask and asked quietly,

"Why'd the ball veer off like that?"

"I thought I'd give it a bit of a curve."

"Oh? You did that on purpose?"

"Yeah. That way, it'll be harder for the defense to catch. I added a bit of force to the bat, like I was slicing off the bottom left of the ball. I'm really good at billiards, you know!" Kino grinned.

Chako-sensei put a hand on her shoulder.

"All I know is that you're a genius of *some* sort, Kino."

They switched pitchers to Kino, with her excellent control.

"Hah!"

Clang.

"There!"

Clang.

It was determined that Shizu and Inuyama had no trouble with batting. And—

"Ah-whoa!"

Whoosh.

"Eek!"

Whoosh.

—it was determined that, in contrast, Elias and Sara were completely useless. That was pretty much expected.

And finally, Shizu took the mound again with Chako-sensei batting.

"You're all dead!"

Whoosh.

Awful.

"That's strange. Maybe I'm not in tip-top shape today? Could you throw me a couple more, Shizu?"

Whoosh. Whoosh.

"Hmm. I don't like the feel of this bat. Ah, there. This one's got a nice weight to it."

Whoosh.

"That was a little slow. I couldn't get the timing straight. Could you make a little faster, Shizu? That'll be easier to hit."

Whoosh. Whoosh.

"Curve balls! I need that bit of curve. Could you do that, Shizu?"

Whoosh.

"It's the sun! The sun keeps getting in my eyes. Can someone just move it aside a bit?"

"Sensei, we should start practicing for defense."

Good on you, Inuyama.

It was nearly 11 when they began defense practice.

What were they doing? Catching the balls Chako-sensei hit and getting them as fast as they could to Shizu at first base.

"I see. So we pick up the ball and send it to first base, which takes the batter out of play."

First off was Kino the pitcher, who finally had begun to understand baseball.

"Here goes! Hyah!"

Chako-sensei tossed the ball into the air with her left hand and swung.

As she intended, the ball rolled in front of Kino. For someone who couldn't get a single hit on Shizu's pitches, Chako-sensei was doing quite well. Talk about selective talents.

"Leave it to me!"

Kino charged like a bull.

Picking up the ball in her gloved left hand, she quickly threw it to first base with her right.

Thud. The ball landed in Shizu's glove. Excellent. After Kino grabbed several balls rolling on the ground, Chako-sensei sent a rather fast one flying at her. Kino stretched her arm and snatched it out of the air.

"That was great, Kino. Your eyes are always on the ball, and you're very quick."

After noting that Kino had no problems, they switched out.

Up this time was Inuyama, who would be the shortstop.

"Here!"

Chako-sensei hit a fast one toward third base.

"Hah!"

Inuyama lunged like a dog.

"Go!"

Then, he leapt into the air and passed to Shizu. It was a very difficult move, but he was quick about it. But the ball seems to be flying quite low.

It was a hard one to catch, rather quick and aimed to bounce off the ground right in front of Shizu.

"Hmph."

But without so much as a blink, Shizu kept one of his long legs on the base as he reached forward. And as though scooping it out of the air, he caught it on the rebound with ease.

"Tch!"

Inuyama and Shizu both had pulled off an excellent play, but the former seemed vexed. It was almost as though he wanted Shizu to fumble and look bad in front of everyone.

"Excellent throw. Keep it up."

Shizu was completely nonchalant. Inuyama ground his teeth.

Inuyama continued to catch Chako-sensei's difficult hits with ease and throw them to Shizu like a demon. Shizu caught them all.

Even from places the third baseman should be covering.

"Hah!"

As though sensing the angle of the ball against Chako-sensei's bat, Inuyama ran for the balls and easily caught them.

At this rate, they wouldn't need anyone on third base. We're firing all the third basemen, folks. A mass restructuring.

Following Inuyama was Shizu.

"Hah!"

Shizu also showcased incredible speed as he caught everything that flew between first and second base. Look at the size of his defensive zone.

Inuyama and Shizu alone were probably enough to take care of the infield. Although it wasn't certain how they'd deal with even a single successful run.

"Hmm..." Chako-sensei intoned. "I knew they'd be good, but this is even better than I'd expected."

The team practiced lazily until noon. That was because Chako-sensei had said,

"You'll tire yourself out if you work too hard. Let's take it easy."

Elias and Sara could catch anything that rolled slowly in their direction, but their throws were abysmal and they ran from anything that flew at them. Maybe Chako-sensei realized that practice was meaningless with these people.

That was why they probably spent more time listening to Shizu's lectures than practicing on the field.

Kindly and considerately, Shizu explained the essential rules and plays.

Thanks to him, even a baseball newbie like Kino finally had a basic grasp of the rules. Afterwards, she mumbled to herself,

"I see. So there's no such thing as runner knock-out in Japanese baseball."

There's no such thing in *any* country's baseball. This ain't MMA.

"Oh. But sometimes when I'm listening to baseball matches, I hear stuff like 'strike', 'taking out the second baseman', 'WHIP', and 'he gets picked off!'. Whoops."

Where do I start?

The hands on the clock tilted into afternoon.

"LUNCHTIME!"

As Kino's excitement surged, lunchtime approached.

"EEEEEEEEEEES!"

A terrifying cry of exuberance shook the grounds. That's understandable.

After all, they received box lunches from a famous place where lunch hour reservations were packed solid for the next three months.

Large boxed lunches—all fifty of them—were delivered on the back of a small truck. Along with hot tea and miso soup in thermos bottles.

Kino and the others laid out a mat on the concrete platform between the school building and the grounds and prepared for lunch—a picnic overlooking the vast grounds.

"Well, let's prepare for the game and eat to our heart's content! The enemy will be here at 1:30, and the game will begin at 2. So take your time and relax until then. Let's eat!" Said Chako-sensei.

Let's eat.

With that, Kino moved like a monster.

"Mm! This Kyoto-style *gindara* sashimi! The *koshihikari* rice from Uonuma! The unagi egg rolls! The Kyoto-style *tsukemono*! YESSSSSS!"

She was certainly eating, but she was so quick her hands were a blur.

And yet she didn't spill a single crumb. What incredible balance. Like an industrial robot wiring integrated circuits.

"Finished!"

Kino had just finished her first box, without leaving a single grain of rice. The box was pretty hefty, you know.

This technique was only possible because Kino is a trained gourmand. Normal readers, please eat at a normal pace and chew your food before swallowing.

The second box was opened. And finished. And then the third. What speed.

In contrast,

"Delicious."

"It's very good."

Shizu and Inuyama were eating at a normal pace, but with supreme elegance. But one just didn't seem to be enough for them, as they both reached for seconds. They could probably eat more than three boxes.

"Ah... that was good."

Sara, who had a healthy appetite, cleaned out her own box. And—

"Um... can I have another one?" Elias asked hesitantly.

"Go right ahead!"

Chako-sensei, who was on her second box, handed Elias his fifth. Although he was still behind Kino (who was on her eighth), he was still wolfing it down. And he had room for more.

"Th-thank you..."

Elias took the box and went back to chewing.

Sara did not comment, already knowing about Elias's enormous appetite. He'd also eaten a lot for breakfast, too.

Elias, who was busy eating—

"...Hm?"

—noticed the smiling diva watch him eat.

"..."

He blushed.

"Hee hee."

Sara smiled.

And from behind the happy couple—

"Sensei! Pass me another box?"

—cried the protagonist.

It looks like spring is still far away for one student.

It was after lunch, but before the opponents arrived.

"Man. The sky's beautiful today."

Kino lay on the mat on the school grounds and stared up at the blue sky.

Next to her lay Sara and Elias, their adorable faces deep in sleep.

Across from them lay Shizu, Chako-sensei, and Inuyama, their eyes listlessly closed.

"Me too..." Kino mumbled. 0.05 seconds later, she fell into sleep mode.

The Take Action Now Club was taking a nap.

It looked like six sticks had been lined up together.

"It definitely looked a little strange, but I saw them all moving until a little earlier. And anything could happen at that school, really, so I ignored it."

—is what the housewife(Female, age 35) who had been watching from a nearby apartment went on to say on the interview.

And at last, the fated hour and a half was upon them.(Note: Japanese Standard Time, +9 GMT).

Though there was no alarm, Chako-sensei sat up like a machine. Inuyama's body, which she had been hugging from behind like a pillow, also rose.

"Mm..."

Still half-asleep, Chako-sensei threw him. Inuyama rolled.

"Agh!"

And he woke up.

Incidentally, when Chako-sensei was hugging him, he had a very sweet expression on his face. Just like the face a dog makes when you pet him. Although I'm not sure why.

Soon, Shizu opened his eyes.

Then Sara.

Then Elias.

One by one, the chosen warriors of the Take Action Now Club rose to face the moment of truth.

"Zzz... I can eat more... yeah... a world made of curry bread..."

Someone please wake up that protagonist.

Chapter 8 - Part 2: The Enemy is the Baseball Club

~Nine~

"Here's to a clean match!"

Chako-sensei said energetically.

The members of the Take Action Now Club stood in a row alongside her. And across,

"A clean match. Thank you, Chako-sensei."

The response came from an ordinary female student from the school.

She was a tall girl with a lively air about her. Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she was wearing red school-issue sweats.

"I'm thankful to everyone from the Take Action Now Club." She added.

Following her,

<Thank you!>

The opponents standing in a row behind her cried in unison, taking off their caps and bowing.

Kino spoke.

"Chako-sensei... you don't mean..."

"Yes, Kino. Everyone, we'll be facing the school baseball team today!"

Yes. Standing before the Take Action Now Club were nine boys in uniform and a girl in sweats.

"I see! That explains it..." Kino mumbled in understanding.

The meaning of the chapter title is finally clear.

"Let's have a clean match, everyone. Get to practicing, now! We'll be having a quick chat with Yuri." Said Chako-sensei.

"Okay." "Let's go." "Let's get started." "Yeah!"

The nine members of the baseball team set down their things and began to run laps around the grounds. Wait, nine? That's only just enough for a game.

But before that, let's go to Chako-sensei.

"Let me introduce everyone."

She introduced the girl in sweats who had shown up with the baseball team.

"This here's Adachi Yuri. She's the manager of our school's baseball team. The team members and I lovingly call her 'Yurippe'. She's a fourth-year student, just like Kino and Inuyama."

"My name is Adachi Yuri! It's nice to meet you!"

Yuri bowed. She wasn't quite as enthusiastic as Kino was before a meal, but it was a close match. Her ponytail shook up and down.

Chako-sensei continued to explain.

"Yurippe's the one who asked for the match. She wanted to schedule a practice game, but she didn't have contacts in other schools. And, well, to be honest, our school's baseball team isn't that great."

The members of the Take Action Now Club(sans Kino) got the gist of the situation.

The goal of every high school baseball team was the Kōshien³. But the students had never heard of their baseball team winning a single preliminary game necessary to qualify for the elusive tournament.

"The baseball team's not popular, and there aren't many members." Chako-sensei said ruthlessly, pointing at the team as they ran in a straight line along the grounds.

One, two, three... Yes. Even on a second and third count, there were only nine people.

On one hand, it meant that anyone could enter the starting lineup as soon as they joined the team. On the other, it meant that if even one person missed out, they could not play a game.

In other words, none of the members could back out saying, 'I have a cold today', 'Today's supposed to be my first date with her', 'I'm not feeling it today', or 'my favorite voice actor's concert is today'.

"But they're all passionate, love baseball, and want to win if they can."

Yuri nodded at Chako-sensei's explanation. The nine members of the baseball team were indeed running dutifully.

"And what better training is there than playing a real game? The problem is, you don't get any stronger if you don't play against someone stronger than you. But our team is so close to the bottom that other schools just won't..."

Yuri trailed off. To be frank, the baseball team wanted help from other teams, but they were so weak that no one would face them. Understandable.

If a team wanted to take time out of their schedule to practice, they were better off playing against someone helpful. No matter what excuse the other schools gave, that was probably what they were all thinking.

³ The Kōshien is Japan's annual national high school baseball championship. It's a tournament that every high school baseball team in Japan dreams of going to.

"And that's why Yurippe here—with her high standards—chose us. We're strong, after all." Chako-sensei declared. Yuri bowed energetically. It was a truly polite request. Yuri spoke, her head bowed a full 90 degrees.

"Thank you for taking time out of your Sunday! It's an honor to be able to play against the Take Action Now Club! Thank you!"

"Not at all," Shizu and Inuyama replied like gentlemen. But behind them,

"I can beat anyone who gets in my way. And I'm going to eat." Kino muttered. What on earth is on this human's mind? 90% food and 10% drinks.

While the baseball club practiced, the Take Action Now Club sat along the platform and waited.

From the looks of the baseball team's defense practice, they couldn't even pay lip service to their skills. The students were sluggish, and sometimes they made simple mistakes from their lack of experience.

But the team, along with Yuri—who was helping to pick up balls—looked happy.

They were not skilled, but they enjoyed the sport. What use was there in liking something they sucked at? Who cares. They were just happy to play.

"To be honest, everyone on the baseball team is a good person..." Chako-sensei said, sounding grave for once. The Take Action Now Club listened closely.

"...But the problem is their supervisor."

Heh. Just like the Take Action Now Club. Kino thought, but did not say. She kept herself in line.

Kino did not know who was the supervisor and coach of the baseball team. Shizu, who knew everything, chimed in.

"Would that be Watanabe-sensei from the social studies department?"

Chako-sensei nodded.

Kino thought of Watanabe-sensei. She remembered a polite man in his mid-thirties. He was married and had a three-year-old daughter, and was a rather popular teacher.

"Huh?"

There was nothing particularly problematic in that image.

Sara and Elias must have thought the same thing, because they also tilted their heads. But Chako-sensei quickly cleared their doubts.

"He's a good, hardworking teacher, but he changes when he leads the team." She explained. "He loves baseball and he's passionate, but that ends up backfiring. He's too strict on the team—in other words, This is Sparta. He won't let even a single puny mistake slide, and scolds the unlucky student in front of everyone. So a lot of members get angry and quit."

"..."

Although Kino was a student there, all of this was news to her. All she knew about the school was the menu for the student cafeteria and the school bakery.

Inuyama spoke.

"So that's why he's not here today."

Come to think of it, Watanabe-sensei was nowhere to be found. Yuri the manager was leading the team. To inform you in advance, he won't appear in this story. Probably ever.

"The baseball team may be weak, but they want to have fun and relax. That's how they should be playing in their matches, but they can't play at their best when they're always scared of making mistakes and getting scolded." Chako-sensei said.

Kino wasn't sure if that sounded convincing coming from Chako-sensei, who was always twice as relaxed as everyone else.

"I want to draw your attention to the captain—um, that one. The one doing pitching practice in the corner. He's Totsugawa, a fifth-year student."

Chako-sensei pointed at a student who was solemnly pitching at the catcher. He was stick-thin and very tall.

He must be Totsugawa. He is a major character in this story, so please try to remember his name.

"He's been a very talented student ever since junior high school—a pitcher *and* a slugger—but he hasn't been playing at his best since he came to our school. Totsugawa always blames himself for his team being weak and for Watanabe-sensei always getting mad at them. Thanks to that, he's suffering from a stomach ulcer at that young age."

Poor thing. The Take Action Now Club gave him looks of pity. He was an example of Japanese responsibility and earnestness gone wrong.

"There is such a thing as being too responsible. If only people were more relaxed, like me!" Chako-sensei commented.

If every person in the country were like her, the country would fall to ruin.

In any case, the Take Action Now Club was facing the baseball team.

"I suppose it won't be as stressful for them to play against us, instead of a genuine team."

Just as Shizu said, in spite of our main trio's incredible athletic skills, the Take Action Now Club was a team of newbies.

Though the baseball team was weak, they practiced hard every day. They would not lose that easily. This might actually be a pretty good match-up.

But—

"Sensei, we still have a problem." Said Shizu.

Naturally. Inuyama, Sara, and Elias had also been concerned for quite some time.

"All right. I'm gonna do this!"

The only person who didn't care was one protagonist named Kino.

"We only have six people, Sensei. And the other team has only the nine—we can't borrow any players." Shizu said.

"I see you've noticed. Good eye, Shizu!" Chako-sensei replied like a teacher, and grinned. You know, it takes a special eye to *not* notice the problem.

Clap.

"Oh no! I didn't think about that!" Kino cried, clapping her hands together, but everyone ignored her.

"Don't worry about it. I prepared three helpers in advance. Come on out!" Chako-sensei exclaimed, raising her hand. And three men suddenly dropped down—excuse me. Chako-sensei swung her hand and pointed at the school gates.

"Attention, please!"

As everyone watched, three men rushed ordinarily through the gates.

They were *kuroko*⁴.

They were three *kuroko*.

Dressed in black with their faces covered by black masks. The very same ones who work in kabuki theater. They had average heights and average builds, and looked nearly identical. Frankly, it's impossible to tell them apart.

<Good afternoon.> They said in unison, bowing together in perfect sync. What teamwork!

Chako-sensei stood behind them.

"These people are our helpers today! From the left, we have—"

The men spoke.

"Please, call me Sato!"

"Please, call me Suzuki!"

"Please, call me Takahashi!"

⁴ Kuroko are stagehands in Japanese theatre who dress all in black.

With names that just begged to be asked, 'those are pseudonyms based on the three most common family names in Japan, aren't they?', one of the *kuroko* stepped forward and raised his hand.

<Together, the three of us are *kuroko*! Nice to meet you!>

Finally, they shouted in unison. I feel like I've heard that line somewhere...

Come to think of it, knowing their names is useless if we can't tell them apart. Don't they have nametags?

"It's nice to see you again. And thank you for helping us with the play before." Said Shizu. The people at the play were, yes, in the same outfits. But how did Shizu know they were the same people? Is it the way they smell? Is that it?

"I forgot to introduce them then, but these three were my underclassmen in college." Chako-sensei lied confidently.

As clever readers may have noticed, these men are members of KAERE.

They've made quite a few appearances, but if you've forgotten them, please refer back to Gakuen Kino 2, chapter 4.

Yes. Composed of talented individuals gathered from the JSDF, the Japan Coast Guard, and the police force, KAERE is the world's number one anti-demon task force!

Hm? How do I know that they're number one?

Because there's only one anti-demon task force in the world.

"We'll be needing your help again today." Shizu said. The rest of the club greeted the *kuroko* in turn.

Kino and Inuyama, who had seen KAERE—er, them—at the play, were not very surprised. But temporary members Sara and Elias were fascinated.

"Um, why are you dressed like *kuroko*?" Sara wondered. Any sane person would want to know.

Although she wasn't expecting an answer, they spoke in order, from the left on—in other words, from Takahashi.

"Because I like *kuroko*!"

I suppose that's understandable.

"Because I always dress this way!" Said Suzuki.

I suppose everyone has a different idea of what is fashionable.

"It's Japanate!"

I have no idea what he's talking about.

In any case, with the addition of three dependable *kuroko* to the team, the Take Action Now Club had nine people.

"Now, time for a strategy meeting."

Glancing at the baseball team, which was hard at work practicing, the club muddled together. Kino turned into Chako-sensei, who turned into— Excuse me. The club *huddled* together. Naturally, they didn't play limbo or anything of the sort.

Chako-sensei looked everyone in the eye (and in the *kuroko*'s case, their masks).

"We'll first decide on the positions. I'll be catcher. And as we said earlier, Kino is the pitcher."

"Yeah!"

"Shizu is on first base."

"Leave it to me."

"Inuyama, shortstop."

"Understood."

That's all good. The problem starts here.

"Elias on second base, and Sara on third."

"Huh?" "Huh?" They asked in unison. Being unskilled at catching fast balls, they didn't really want to take the infield.

But Chako-sensei sounded very nonchalant.

"Don't worry, you two. Just stand next to your plates. You don't even have to catch the ball if it comes. Elias, you hide behind Kino. Sara, if anything happens, run as fast as you can."

She had given up on them right away. Sara and Elias were really just there to fill numbers. But they seemed relieved about Chako-sensei's judgement.

"And I'll leave the outfield to you! I'm counting on you, Mishima! Ito! Shimizu!"

<Understood!>

The men cried in unison. Wait, did something happen to their names?

"We're counting on you to keep the outfield secure. Throw everything you catch to Inuyama or Shizu."

<Understood!>

The baseball team seems to be finished with practice.

It was 1:57 in the afternoon.

Let the battle commence.

Author Sigsawa Keiichi will be giving his live commentary on the game.

In other words, I'm going to keep writing.

Ahem. Under the beautiful blue sky, the nine members of the Take Action Now Club and the nine members of the baseball team stood face-to-face before home plate.

On the faces of the baseball team members were quizzical looks—why are we playing against these people?

First was the beautiful but truly bizarre—

"Hm? What is it?"

—bizarre but truly beautiful Chako-sensei.

"Let's have a good game."

The cool and handsome Shizu, famous for his katana.

"Um. Let's have a good game."

The second star of the school, Sara the famous diva.

"..."

Inuyama, a beautiful white-haired boy.

"Hello..."

Elias, a foreigner in looks only.

And three *kuroko* who were clearly suspicious. You couldn't blame the team for being confused.

The baseball team was a little amused, and very confused.

Incidentally, Kino—who was completely unremarkable save for her belt—was cast out of the spotlight.

"Hey! I'm the protagonist here!"

Anger will get you nowhere. Although Kino would have been feared like an apex predator if this were an eating contest.

"Tch. I'll destroy you all. Grr..."

But the only one who responded to her mumbling and teeth-grinding was—

"Sigh..."

—Hermes, hanging from her belt.

The two teams are finally gathered, but aren't we still missing something?

Ah, yes. The umpires.

You need at least four umpires in a baseball game. One at home plate, and one on each of the bases.

Then,

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

A cloud of dust swept past the grounds, and four people—who did not look at all like umpires—walked in, shoulder-to-shoulder.

With solemn steps, they stepped forward—four middle-aged men. They looked so grave that they'd probably spent their entire lives refereeing.

It was like the opening sequence of a cop show or a historical drama. It's a shame that there's no BGM.

"You're here."

"You're finally here."

Chako-sensei and Yuri said in unison. They must have been the ones who called the men.

The four men stood side-by-side behind the home plate. The home plate umpire, who was holding a mask, solemnly spoke.

"Good afternoon." He said gravely yet tersely. He had a resonant baritone voice, like a movie star. No one could go against a voice like his.

At the home plate umpire's instruction, the leader of each team stepped forward. Chako-sensei stepped aside, so Totsugawa was met by Shizu.

The umpire gravely announced the rules.

"The game will last for nine innings, no overtime. No blows to the eyes or below the belt. Hitting with the elbow will be a warning on the first—"

Is this umpire all right?

"—one joker in play. 3 Spades beats joker. Eight Ender and Revolution rules are in play."

Shizu and Totsugawa nodded, listening carefully to the explanation. Are these two all right?

"No passing when the yellow flag is being waved. Stop in case of a red flag, and the checkered flag means the race is finished."

As the umpire continued, Inuyama whispered to Chako-sensei.

"Where did you find these people?"

Chako-sensei replied quietly.

"On the internet. Yurippe and I used the library computer to look for umpires in the area—"

Of course. You can find anything on the internet—even umpires for a suspicious game like this.

"—but we couldn't find anyone, so we ended up going to Yahoo Auctions. We got 'em cheap."

Are these umpires really all right?

Now, it's time to decide on who gets to bat first—in other words, which team is first on the offensive.

The home plate umpire took out a coin.

He flipped it over to show that it had both a heads-side and a tails-side. On the heads-side was the profile of a goddess poking out her tongue like Peko-chan⁵. And the tails-side was, for some unknown reason, charred black.

Shizu allowed Totsugawa to pick.

"Um, I... I'll take... tails! No, wait. Heads!"

He must be very nervous.

This is only the beginning. Is he really going to be all right?

In any case, the coin toss dictated that the Take Action Now Club was batting first. In other words, the offensive.

"Then, let's begin. All bow!"

"Let's have a clean match!"

"Let's have a clean match!"

Two rows of people bowing to one another in unison. It's a heartwarming sight.

Game start. Finally.

The Take Action Now Club's bench was on the first base-side of the field. The baseball team's bench was on the other side.

That didn't, however, mean that they *had* real benches.

⁵ Peko-chan is the famous mascot of Japanese confectionary/restaurant company, Fujiya.

The Take Action Now Club had the mat they had used earlier that day. As Chako-sensei had prepared thermoses and snacks, which were carried in by the *kuroko*, their bench turned into a feeding frenzy.

"Huzzah! Whoohee!"

Looks like Kino is happy. What language is she cheering in?

The baseball team was using the platform by the school building as their bench. Yuri had gotten some water in a large plastic tank and was mixing up sports drinks for the team.

The team soon finished preparations and took the defensive.

Now, who would have the honor of batting first for the Take Action Now Club?

"Oh, right. We need to think about that. First will be... we'll go in order. Sara! After that will be Elias!"

Where has Chako-sensei put her sense of strategy?

"M-me?" Sara repeated nervously. Chako-sensei handed her a helmet and a bat.

"Go on. Have fun!"

And with that, she so irresponsibly sent Sara off.

Shizu, who could no longer sit by and watch, spoke up.

"Sensei, perhaps the three of us should be the first three batters."

That's the logical choice. After all, the first person on the lineup has more chances to bat.

Generally, the players with the best chances of safely reaching a base were first or second. Even better if they were fast runners. And players who could hopefully send everyone to home plate with a hit were usually third, fourth, and fifth.

Was it really all right to plan the batting order so carelessly?

"It's all right. Don't worry. This is a strategy of sorts, you know." Chako-sensei said, neither taken aback nor hurried. So in the end, Sara was the first batter.

She cut a rather sad figure, but Sara nervously stepped up to the plate and bowed her head. Oh, her helmet's crooked.

Was it really okay to play baseball with a celebrity like her? The baseball team wondered.

"Play ball!"

The umpire called heartlessly.

The game has begun!

Sara took three strikes in a row. She didn't even get a chance to swing.

Elias did not fare any better. He tried to swing twice or so, but it was futile.

Chako-sensei, who followed, was the same. She swung all three times and failed.

That was three outs—time for a change. The top of the first inning was over in the blink of an eye.

Totsugawa, the pitcher, ended up throwing only ten balls in total.

'This is a piece of cake. I'll win this, no problem.'

Something like relief flashed over his profiled face as he stepped off the mound.

Chako-sensei stepped off the home plate and went to the Take Action Now Club, all decked out for defense with gloves at the ready.

"Well, he throws really fast. We might have some trouble getting in a hit."

Says the person who swung with gusto when the ball bounced off the ground.

"So don't let 'em take a single point, Kino." Chako-sensei said, her eye glinting.

"I won't." Kino nodded. Then, she added—

"If they don't score any runs on us, are you going to buy us any special food?"

"Well—"

Although it was a mystery what Chako-sensei had said,

"Hahaha! I'll show you what I'm made of! Prepare yourselves. You won't get to *touch* the ball as long as food's on the line! Yeah!"

Kino spun her arms wildly and stepped onto the mound.

"There's something wrong with this picture, Miss Pitcher." Hermes commented.

Kino fixed the gun belt around her waist, pressed her cap firmly down on her head, and lathered her hands with the powdered rosin she had just learned to use.

"I'll do this!"

She held her breath. For a second, a hint of gravity flickered in her eyes.

And so, Hermes was unable to say anymore. Ah, loneliness.

"Throw!"

Kino practiced pitching several times to Chako-sensei, who stood in as catcher. *Thud. Thud.* The ball was practically sucked into the glove.

The baseball was initially relieved that Shizu was not the pitcher. But as they watched, their faces grew stony.

All right. It's the bottom of the first, and let's start the offense.

Oh. And it's over, in the blink of an eye.

The baseball team, freed from their supervisor-slash-coach, had been cheering.

"Take it easy!" "We're here to have fun!" "It's just a relaxing game!"

To repay Yuri for her unusual dedication, they had enthusiastically taken the mound. But—

"Hyah!"

Kino's pitches made a mockery of them all.

That was, in part, thanks to Chako-sensei the catcher guiding Kino. She must have all the info and strategy for each team member memorized. she held out the glove into corners where each batter would have difficulty hitting—in other words, places where Kino should throw at.

"Over there this time, huh. Go."

Kino threw with pinpoint precision at the corners Chako-sensei picked. With sniper-precision. And very fast, too. The batters might have a lot of trouble with her.

And each throw, even the ones that were barely in the box—

"Strike three! Out!"

—was carefully and solemnly called by the umpire.

And so, Kino took out the baseball team's three batters all in a row.

Now, the top of the second inning.

C'mon, do your best. Hurry up. Use your time wisely.

Batting for the Take Action Now Club this time were the three *kuroko*.

"Hmph!"

"Yah!"

"Hyah!"

And all three were out.

To explain for the sake of the *kuroko*'s honor, they hadn't held back on purpose, and they weren't untalented.

None of them had experience with baseball, but all three were very athletic. They had done their best to hit the ball. Their enthusiastic swings and multiple fouls speak for their determination.

So what just happened? The reason lay with Totsugawa's newfound resolve.

Seeing the incredible pitches thrown by a newbie(maybe) like Kino, his fighting spirit must have been set alight.

He gave it his best shot from the first pitch on, throwing difficult balls and taking out all three batters.

The baseball team was all smiles as they returned to the bench.

"Awesome!" "That's our ace for you."

Everyone praised him, giving him hearty slaps on the shoulder.

Totsugawa also grinned. But,

"I can't lose..."

His smile quickly gave way to a scowl as he muttered to himself.

The bottom of the second.

The baseball team was brimming with energy, inspired by Totsugawa's drive.

"Hah!"

The batters did their best to hit Kino's pitches. Their pride as baseball team members gave them tenacity.

The fourth batter especially, who was a power hitter, narrowly fouled off a strike and hung on as well as he could, wearing Kino out.

"Damn it! He's good!"

But Kino has more stamina than she looks. And she stuffed herself silly earlier.

Out. And another. She only just managed to strike out the fourth and fifth batter. But—

Clang!

"Nooooooooooooo!"

Kino had let her guard down. Her ball slowed down, which made it a perfect target for batter 6.

The ball flew low toward the gap between the shortstop and the third base.

"Whoa!" The baseball team stood. Would this be their first base hit?

At that moment,

“HAH!”

Inuyama leapt to the side. The ball landed in his glove.

It was a beautiful jump. Just like a doggy catching a frisbee in midair.

Inuyama landed on his arm, then spun forward and stood as though nothing had happened. The dirt clinging to his sweats scattered to the ground.

“Phew. That was close.” Kino sighed.

The umpire raised a fist to signal the out.

“Wh-what the heck...” “How’d he just catch that?” “W-warp speed?” “Isn’t that guy the shortstop?”

The baseball team whispered in shock.

Their surprise was only natural. When Inuyama stood, he had come face-to-face with Sara, whose eyes had turned to dinner plates. In other words, he caught the ball from very close to third base.

Time to switch out again.

“Let’s all get out there and have fun!” Yuri cheered, spurring on the team as they set up for defense. But their steps looked heavier than before.

“You were amazing, Inuyama-senpai.” Sara said as the Take Action Now Club returned to the bench. And staring from a distance was—

“Damn it... they’re a bunch of newbies...”

—a member of the baseball team.

“I can’t lose here... there’s nothing more humiliating. It’ll bring shame even to my descendants... I’ll end up committing *seppuku*...”

His voice was filled with bitterness and resolve.

Who was this, you wonder?

Obviously, it was him.

The guy headed for the mound.

The top of the third. Kino, the seventh batter, was up.

“I’ll send it flying!”

Putting on her helmet, she took her metal bat and strode toward home plate.

"Just a base hit is fine too, Kino. Even if you bunt it and the ball rolls to the outfield." Hermes advised from her belt.

"I know, Hermes. Baseball is all about teamwork." Kino confidently replied.

"Oh?" Hermes sounded pleasantly surprised.

"Since I'm the first batter this inning, once I get to first base—"

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"—I'll pull off a comeback grand slam. Goodbye, pinch-hitters!"

"...Were you even listening?"

Hermes was disappointed.

At this moment, he was probably the most disappointed cell phone strap in the world.

Comebacks, grand slams, and pinch-hitters were completely irrelevant to the situation. She got every one wrong.

But Kino doesn't care.

"Right. Right now, I am Babe Ruth."

"I'm surprised you know him."

"Bay Bruce, right? Where the foghorns sound?"

"...Kino, what is the relationship between baseball and bays?"

"...First cousins?"

"I see. On the mother's side or father's side?"

"Bay in English is 'bay', father is 'father', and mother is 'mother'."

"...And?"

"That means I can't tell you which side just from the name."

"I see."

Lost in highly un-constructive conversation, Kino stood in the right batter's box. For your information, right and left in this case is from the pitcher's perspective. So the box on the third base-side is the 'right batter's box', and the one on the first-base side is the 'left batter's box'.

"I'll do this."

Kino bowed lightly to the umpire and the baseball team.

And,

"I'll get a base hit!" She cried, holding her bat perpendicular to the ground. Bam.

Isn't that something you call a called home run?

Normally, the audience would go wild at something like that. But there's no one to cheer this time. Meanwhile, it was an act of provocation to the opposing team. Don't try this at home, kids.

"Is she serious?" "Not bad." "Just try it, newbie."

The defense sniggered.

Wouldn't it be nice if everyone could just laugh like this every time some n00b tries to show off?

"Grr!"

But it seems like laughter was nowhere on the horizon for the pitcher, Totsugawa.

The deadly-calm catcher quickly signed him. He should throw the first pitch outside the strike zone.

The strike zone, for your information, is an imaginary square through which a pitch must pass through.

In other words, in this case, they would throw the ball outside the square. A newbie like Kino would overextend herself and swing anyway, getting a strike.

Totsugawa silently nodded and whipped his arm forward.

A perfectly straight pitch. Completely intentional.

'Hey, that's not what we just—'

The catcher hurried to catch the ball, but it never reached his glove.

"Cha... shu... men!"

With a three-part rhythm on her lips, Kino pulled back and stepped forward, her eyes locked on the ball.

Clang!

A crisp, clear sound shook the grounds. This is one nice baseball bat.

The ball shot over Totsugawa's head—

"Ah—"

—and as he turned, it slipped past the center fielder's grasp, and tumbled along the ground.

Kino, immensely satisfied with the hit—

"Oh well, my name's Kinoemon~♪"

—was half-humming at home plate. Stay back, JAS*AC. I'm warning you!

Then,

"All right. Next pitch, please." She requested.

"Huh?"

The pitcher stared. Like he was looking at an exotic animal.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, KINO?! RUN!"

At Chako-sensei's cry,

"Oh, right."

Kino hurried to first base. She put her back into it and charged.

Kino is a rather fast runner. The ball went from the center fielder, to the second baseman, to the first baseman—

"There."

—almost the very second Kino stepped on the base.

Verdict, chief?

"Safe!" The umpire cried, holding out his hands.

"Man, that was close."

Kino, who could have easily made second base, innocently muttered to herself.

"I guess baseball's all about speed."

The honor of the first base hit of the day went to Kino and her run to first base.

Although it really could have been a run to the second base.

"Hey, I thought you said you wouldn't say that stuff." Kino said. I never promised that.

"Do you understand, Kino?" Shizu asked, running up to first base as a messenger to convey some important information.

Inuyama was batting next. If it wasn't a fly, she should run. Second base was her destination, but third base was fine too, if she could reach it.

He also told her that there was a *kuroko* standing by near third base. If he spun his arms wildly at her, Kino had time and was to run to home plate. If he held up his palms, she was to stop and not dart out.

"Okay." Kino nodded firmly. "Could you tell the *kuroko* not to wave his arms too hard? I don't want him to fly off. If he gets tired and stops spinning, he'll crash."

Don't worry yourself over things that won't happen.

"Anyway, do your best."

With that, Shizu left and Inuyama stepped up to the plate.

With ferocity in his eyes, Inuyama calmly took the bat. His form was compact yet sharp.

The pressure around his tranquil form was formidable, to say the least. Someone who could sense power levels could probably see his aura shimmering.

"Grk..."

Trepidation rose to Totsugawa, as he faced Inuyama down. It was natural. After all, his ignoring the catcher's strategy had lost them the first base.

"All right, I'm gonna run." Kino readied herself.

And the batter, of all people, was Inuyama—the one responsible for the incredible catch during the top of the inning.

"Let's calm down and do this!" The catcher roared.

Totsugawa stilled himself.

"I'm still fine."

His face relaxed slightly. That one mistake would be his *only* mistake. He looked at the catcher's signal.

This pitch, as well, should be thrown out of the strike zone. Totsugawa nodded and threw.

"Ball!"

Inuyama let the ball pass, glaring silently at the pitcher. It was a serious duel now.

Now, how about that second pitch?

It was another close one, flying low outside the strike zone. Inuyama did not swing. He stood like an immovable mountain.

The catcher signed Totsugawa. The third pitch would be narrowly on the edge of the strike zone, but on the inner half.

Narrowly on the edge... sort of reminds me of politics. Which parliament were we talking about again?

The ball left Totsugawa's hand and precisely down the course he planned.

"Hah!"

And there goes Inuyama with a swing. His left foot stepped outwards—

Clang.

And he hit the well-placed pitch, sending it flying to the left.

The third baseman couldn't even take a step as the ball shot past to his left and rolled into the outfield. This is called a hit to left field.

"Run, Kino. Just to second base."

"Got it."

As Hermes instructed, Kino ran to second base and came to a stop. She did *not* charge forward like a rhino. Inuyama reached first base with ease.

"Damn it..."

Totsugawa ground his teeth. In the blink of an eye, they were down to no outs and two bases filled. The team was in trouble.

His throw had been perfect. But Inuyama was just that good. However—

"Damn it... damn it..."

The ace was a bit shaken. Actually, he was very shaken. His gloved left hand pressed down on his stomach. His stomach stung.

And standing in the left batter's box was—

"Please give it your best shot."

—Shizu. A lone dove flew past him.

Not only was he handsome and intelligent, he was so athletic that every sports team in the school had tried to scout him. Every student knew of his incredible skills.

The air around him as he stood with the bat was even more formidable than Inuyama's. The katana he still wore at his side looked like it was in the way, but it was no time to be making such observations.

Totsugawa stood on the mound. Though the air was chilly, there was cold sweat dribbling down his face. The same went for the catcher.

If Shizu managed a home run like this, the Take Action Now Club would take three runs at once. Why did he have to be batter 9?

The baseball team had but one option. Yes. The catcher stood.

The pitcher would throw balls that could not be squared up on, four times in a row. Then the batter could freely walk to first base. It was a ploy to take the bat out of Shizu's hands. An intentional base on balls.

An underhanded play like this against a team of newbies? Totsugawa had no choice but to obey.

"Grr..."

With a mix of disgruntlement and relief, he threw. Telling himself that it was all necessary for victory.

The ball flew far to the left. The catcher moved to catch it.

Shizu stood calmly in the batter's box. When the umpire called four balls, Shizu slowly went to first base.

Naturally, Kino went to third base and Inuyama to second.

Now the bases are loaded, and there are zero outs! This is the Take Action Now Club's big chance!

The next batter was—

"Oh no..."

Batter 1 again. The sniffing Sara.

We all know how this story ends.

Totsugawa threw with passion and cold cunning.

"Eek!"

Sara was out.

"Whoa!"

As was Elias.

"Prepare yourselves for a graaaaaaand slaaaaaaaam!"

And so was Chako-sensei, in spite of her voice shaking the foundations of the grounds and the city around them.

It's the bottom of the third.

The baseball team also started off with batter 7. But,

"Not gonna lose!"

Kino's spirited throws were too overwhelming. Out.

Batter 8 did everything he could to last, but he only managed a feeble grounder toward second base. Shizu lunged and grabbed the ball.

"Kino, to first!"

And he threw to Kino, who followed Hermes's advice to the letter and ran from the mound to first base.

"Hyah!"

Snatching the ball in midair, Kino stepped on the base faster than the batter. Out.

"Argh!" "That was close." "He was doing really well."

The baseball team was vexed.

Batter 9 was the pitcher, Totsugawa.

The coach had decided on the team's batting order. To his irritation, Totsugawa had been dropped down because he'd been making nothing but mistakes recently. He was, on one hand, understanding of the fact. On the other hand, he wanted to be given a higher position.

Totsugawa carried himself with determination as he faced down Kino.

'If nothing else, I'll get myself to first base.'

That was his humble motive, but Kino's throws were much too accurate.

"Strike one!"

A swing and a miss. And again. Three strikes passed by in a flash.

"ARGH!"

Frustrated, Totsugawa slammed the end of his bat on the ground.

"Totsugawa-senpai..."

Yuri the manager looked on, worried.

Let's speed things along.

Top of the fourth. *Kuroko*, go.

Kuroko 4 and 5, disappointingly enough, hit nothing but groundball outs and struck out respectively.

And number 6 made solid contact with the ball out of nowhere—

Clang! The ball flew high into the outfield, but it was unfortunately an easy flyball to center.

Eating *sakuramochi* with a side of cheap green tea for a snack, Kino watched with unusual gravitas.

"Hm..."

"Huh. Something on your mind?" Hermes asked quietly.

Kino replied.

"Yeah. Looking at that ball flying through the air, I feel like..."

"Like?"

"I feel like getting some chicken."

"Oh."

Bottom of the fourth.

the baseball team was back to batter 1.

And once again, three batters were taken out back-to-back.

Determined to reach first base no matter what, batter 1 attempted a safety bunt from the first pitch out. Lightly hitting the ball, he ran as fast as his quick legs could carry him. But—

"Hah!"

Kino's furious rush and throw, in tandem with Shizu's long limbs, narrowly put a stop to the batter's charge.

Batters 2 and 3 were struck out back-to-back against Kino's unyielding pitches.

"What the..." "Didn't think they'd be this good." "This is gonna be one tough game..."

Ripples of unease began to shake the baseball team as they shared their thoughts, returning to defense after a short rest.

"..."

Totsugawa too, as he returned to the mound with a complicated look, sensed the beginnings of a heavy agony taking root in his mind.

His suffering will only get worse in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 - Part 3: The Enemy is Yourself

~Enemy Line~

Huzzah!

"Take this!"

It was the top of the fifth, and the first pitch was thrown at Kino.

The catcher had signed for a low ball. It was a good plan, after all, to let Kino, Inuyama, and Shizu pass with intentional bases on balls.

And Totsugawa was intent on following that plan. But his focus failed him, and the ball flew straight for the center. It was an awful pitch.

Without a hint of pity, Kino swung nonchalantly.

The verdict was clear the moment she struck the ball—or, from Totsugawa's perspective, the moment the ball was hit.

"Whoa!" "Oh!"

Even Sara and Elias cried out as the ball flew into the distance.

Inuyama, who had been waiting his turn from next to home plate, chuckled.

"She hit it."

"She did."

Shizu and Chako-sensei commented coolly, drinking tea out of their thermoses.

The ball rocketed into the sky like a firework.

"Wow, it's an out-of-the-park home run!" Hermes cried.

"...You mean, 'out of the park'?" Kino wondered as she ran.

"Yeah. That." Hermes replied, and went quiet.

After a very long flight through the air, the ball crossed far over a white line drawn on the grounds, which indicated a home run boundary, and landed. And it rolled away somewhere where no one was around to pick it up.

It was a splendid solo home run by Kino.

"Don't forget to step on every base, or you're going to be out."

As Hermes instructed, Kino carefully ran the course and returned to home plate.

"That was incredible." Inuyama said, welcoming her back.

"Yeah. Thanks!" Kino, who usually gave him the cold shoulder, replied cheerily.

After all, it was a cause for celebration.

Take Action Now Club 1, Baseball team 0.

With his hands over his knees, Totsugawa hung his head.

The home run was his fault. He could not blame the fielders.

"It's all right, man!" "It's just one run!" "We'll just make it up later!" "Cheer up!"

The teammates behind him cheered warmly.

But in spite of the vibrations on his eardrums, his brain registered nothing.

The catcher quickly called for a time-out and jogged over to the mound.

He reminded Totsugawa that all they had to do was send Inuyama and Shizu with bases on balls—he had to calm down.

"R-right... Sorry."

"Don't talk like that, man. Be positive—it's just one run. We'll catch up."

"Y-yeah."

"The crazy coach isn't even around. You gotta relax."

"Yeah..."

As the catcher returned to his position, Totsugawa kicked at the mound with all his might. His face was set.

"Totsugawa-senpai..." Yuri whispered, concerned.

"It's almost time... but not yet." Chako-sensei muttered to herself.

"?" "?"

Sara and Elias tilted their heads adorably.

The game resumed.

Inuyama got to first base on a walk. The catcher just didn't have to stand.

Inuyama calmly let the balls pass by, quietly heading to the base.

Next was Shizu.

It wasn't even a match at this point. The catcher stood. Two bases on balls in a row.

The corner of his mouth twitching in frustration, Totsugawa pitched. All four times, as though he were playing catch.

Shizu never got the chance to swing. Inuyama headed for second base, and Shizu for first.

What came next was obvious.

Sara struck out. Totsugawa ended up throwing three balls and almost sent her to first base, but when he finally threw a strike,

"Phew..."

It wasn't Totsugawa, but Sara who sighed in relief.

Elias was next. But—

"I wanted to get a hit..."

He feebly tried his best and ended up getting a grounder, but it was a foul. Totsugawa's throws had grown noticeably weak.

The last throw was a curve ball. Elias struck out.

"It's time for me to shine! And that time is now! Ah, as the teacher I shall hit a home run and bring my students home! Now! Prepare yourself! Prepare to worship me! Prepare to greet me with that million-dollar smile!"

Chako-sensei spoke theatrically as she headed for the plate.

"Let's get ready."

"Yes." "Okay."

Kino, Elias, Sara, and—

"We should get going."

"Right." "Right."

The three *kuroko* put their gloves on.

To no one's surprise, Chako-sensei struck out.

It was fabulous.

As she returned to the bench, Chako-sensei complained out loud.

"It feels like the ball is always dodging the bat. D'you think it's haunted?"

No, that's not it.

"Or maybe the earth's magnetic fields are tampering with my eyesight?"

No, that's not it.

"The bat's probably busted. I bet it wobbles when I swing it."

No, that's not it.

The *kuroko* were the only ones who deigned to reply.

"Sensei. We have to get ready."

Inuyama came running from second base to get her moving.

The bottom of the fifth. The baseball team was on the offense.

So far, not one member had made it to first base.

In other words, Kino was throwing a perfect game. She pitched with the determination to let no one pass.

The stubborn fourth batter finally hit the ball. It flew to the left. But unfortunately, it was just a fly ball.

Kino watched a *kuroko* catch the ball.

"Doesn't have to be a delicacy. I like fried horse mackerel, too." She mumbled to herself.

Batter 5 hit a grounder toward shortstop. Inuyama quickly caught it and threw to Shizu. It was a very fast one, low to the ground, but—

"Hmph."

Shizu caught it with ease.

Batter 6 hit a foul pop-up toward the catcher.

"All right, so bright, delight, tonight, aye aye aye~♪"

Taking off her mask, Chako-sensei hummed along after the ball. It felt like she was going to pull off something funny, but she did not.

"Fried oyster is fine, too." Kino said to herself. That was when Chako-sensei grabbed the ball perfectly normally. Time to switch again.

The baseball team returned to defense. Had they been discouraged by the Take Action Now Club's performance? Not really.

"Man, they're good."

"It's only one run. I think we're having a decent match—I'm even having fun."

"Me too. As long as we let those three go, we won't lose any more points."

They even seemed to be enjoying the neck-and-neck game. Their annoying coach was absent, and they were playing against famous people and newbies.

The baseball team was beginning to rediscover their love of baseball.

"Do your best, guys!"

At least, that's what it looked like to Yuri. Well, except for one person.

"You're doing really well too, Totsugawa-senpai!" She grinned at him.

But he did not respond.

He departed for the mound with all the enthusiasm of an office worker putting in overtime with no extra pay.

The top of the sixth.

The Take Action Now Club was on the offensive.

The first *kuroko* struck out.

The second hit an infield grounder. The Take Action Now Club had two outs.

Has Totsugawa gotten a hold of himself? Has the ace finally returned?

Yuri was starting to get embarrassed about her worries.

"It's just about time..." Chako-sensei mumbled from the opposite bench.

"For what?" Sara wondered as she reached for some chocolate.

Elias, who was stuffing his mouth with his eighth baumkuchen, also turned. As a result, both he and Sara missed the action.

"Dead ball!"

The third *kuroko* was hit by the pitch.

"..."

Totsugawa stood in a daze.

He was so shocked that he forgot to take off his cap and apologize, just standing pale on the mound.

He was not supposed to let anyone on the bases before Kino, Inuyama, and Shizu. Just one person on a base, and he couldn't pitch three intentional walks.

The *kuroko* dressed like a *kuroko* rubbed his arm, sore from the hit, and headed to first base. He stepped on it.

That was supposed to be the baseball team's buffer. It was supposed to prevent Kino and Inuyama and Shizu from scoring any runs.

The hit by pitch was his own fault. No one else's.

"..."

Sweat covered his face like he had a fever.

"..."

The catcher couldn't bring himself to go up to him.

"All right. Let's see if I can get another home run."

Completely ignoring the pitcher's plight, Kino skipped over to home plate.

To Totsugawa, the girl in school-issue sweats with a gun belt around her waist probably looked like a ghost or a devil or a demon. He wasn't exactly wrong.

The catcher signaled for a ball.

In other words, it was okay to let all three hitters get walks with bases on balls.

The Take Action Club already had two outs. The baseball team could just give them one more run, then strike Sara out. They could close a two-point gap.

If Kino managed another home run, the baseball team would be giving them two runs. That would make the score 3 to 0. Everyone knew it was best to minimize their losses.

"..."

Totsugawa pressed his cap lightly onto his head. As though hiding his eyes.

After such a long pause that the catcher began to worry, he finally nodded.

Then, Totsugawa threw the first pitch.

"Ah!"

It was clearly a bad throw. Violently so.

And of all places, it was heading in a straight line for Kino—a perfect dead ball to her face.

Was this another walk? Totsugawa wondered. But at that moment—

"Nice throw!" Kino cried.

Hey, don't you think you're being just a bit—

Clang!

Before the author could finish, Kino hit the ball.

She had pushed it away with the tip of the bat in her left hand, which she had stuck out in front of her face.

Oh yeah, she said earlier that she was really good at billiards. Yes, that was foreshadowing.

The ball bounced off the tip of the bat and flew over the shortstop's head. He leapt as quickly as he could, but he could not catch it. The ball flew into the outfield.

While the center fielder and the left fielder desperately chased the ball, the *kuroko* made it to third base and stopped. Kino, who ran as soon as she made the hit, reached second base with ease.

That was two outs with two bases filled.

The catcher walked up to Totsugawa again and said something.

Although no one could hear him, it was clear that he was trying to calm Totsugawa down. Actually, they were still all right. Kino was supposed to get a walk from a base on balls anyway.

Inuyama took the plate. Naturally, it was a base on balls. Inuyama headed to first base.

Two outs. The bases were loaded. Shizu was the batter.

The catcher stood again for the base on balls. This was their only option now.

"..."

Totsugawa said nothing and threw. And again. And again.

"That's right. Keep pitching."

Chako-sensei grinned boldly at the bench.

Then, she turned to Sara beside her and whispered,

"Could you do exactly as I say next time, Sara?"

Positively devilish.

Shizu reached first base on a base on balls. The *kuroko* on third base returned to home.

That was one more run for the Take Action Now Club. The score was 2 to 0.

But the game wasn't finished yet.

The baseball team would have gotten this result even if Kino hadn't made the hit, so their losses had been minimized. Really, at this point it was just a matter of pride.

That was what the catcher had told Totsugawa.

Totsugawa had the look of a forty-something office worker who had just been laid off. He did not react to anything.

"It's all right. Sara's up next—she's never gonna hit. Just throw like you usually do. Like you're playing catch." The catcher said to him, returning to home plate.

That was when the *kuroko* standing near third base whispered something to Kino.

Kino was flabbergasted.

"Really? Donuts from that super-popular place? They're already here?"

The third baseman sighed.

Sara was up.

This was her fourth time at the batter's box today. She had struck out every time.

"I'll do my best."

Ignoring her helmet sliding down, Sara courteously bowed.

"..."

Then, she stared at Totsugawa's form thoughtfully. And the moment the ball left his hand—

"There."

—instead of swinging, she held out the bat horizontally in front of her. Yes. It was a bunt.

At the same time,

"Hah!"

Kino launched herself forward to home plate.

"GIMME!"

Her goal was the donuts she would receive when she reached the plate. This is the greatest sprint of her youth.

In other words, this was something called a squeeze play—where the batter bunts in order to get someone on the third base to home. Like the name says, it's a play where you squeeze out a run.

But right now, the Take Action Now Team had two outs. The bunter was almost always guaranteed to be taken out, so what were they thinking? (To be fair, there *is* something called a bunt single, where the batter can be safe.)

The pitch had been a slow one, focused on getting a strike. It hit the bat Sara held out with all her courage, and bounced up. Right at Totsugawa.

Sara broke into a run.

Though it was a coincidence, the ball, which bounced right off the bat, rolled directly at Totsugawa—and quickly.

Although he could probably not get Kino out at home plate, he could grab the ball and easily take out the batter heading for the first. There was no need for panic.

Totsugawa picked up the ball. And with his gaze on Sara, who was less than halfway to first base, threw without hesitation. But—

“No!”

The throw was wild. Yuri screamed.

The first baseman leapt up as high as he could, but the ball passed one meter over his outstretched hand and flew.

Kino threw herself at home plate as though she were sliding. Inuyama made it around third base, followed by Shizu at second.

Oblivious, Sara ran as hard as she could. She sprinted. Her helmet fell off her head.

The ball rolled away, past the smiling Chako-sensei, hit a storage shed, and bounced back toward the field.

The right fielder rushed in and leapt on the ball. Now, which way to throw? He wondered, looking back at the diamond.

“What?!”

Inuyama made it to home plate. Shizu was just passing third. Talk about fast. A *kuroko* was spinning his arms so hard it looked like he was trying to fly off.

“Please get there!”

The right fielder threw desperately.

The ball flew toward the catcher at home plate. It was a little far to the left, but not a bad throw overall. The catcher could grab it and get Shizu out.

The catcher caught the ball and turned to Shizu, who was running toward home plate.

“Yes!”

Certain of success, the catcher reached out—

“Hmph.”

Shizu disappeared. From right before his eyes.

“Huh?”

The catcher’s glove touched nothing but thin air.

Shizu flew.

Right over the catcher's head like a lone dove in flight.

With his left hand he held down his katana so it wouldn't fall out mid-flight. And with his right, he landed in the middle of home plate.

"Hah!"

And he finished with a forward somersault.

He made landing nearly two meters from home plate.

"SAFE!" The home plate umpire declared.

"Urgh!"

To make sure they gave away no more runs, the catcher turned to the infield.

"Wow, I hit it!"

Sara was standing alone at first base, her eyes wide as she clapped her hands.

Three runs for the Take Action Now Club.

In other words, the score was 5 to 0.

"..."

Totsugawa, standing behind the catcher, fell to his knees.

His face was whiter than the clouds that failed to show today.

His mistake had cost them three runs.

The fielders' usual mistakes were nowhere to be seen. They were playing perfectly. In fact, without their coach around, their defense was doing better than ever. The throws back to home plate, too.

Totsugawa was the only one messing up today.

Like a lethargic zombie, he returned to the mound.

"C'mon, we're still at two outs."

The ever-encouraging catcher tried to speak to him, but received no response.

"Man, this isn't good." The catcher mumbled. He decided that, once Elias struck out, he would have a good pep talk with Totsugawa.

The game would continue whether the pitcher was traumatized or not.

And there were no substitutes to stand in his place. There was no one else on the team capable of pitching. It was a cruel reality to face.

In any case, the Take Action Now Club had two outs and one person on first base. The next batter was Elias—there was enough cause to be calm.

But—

“Ball!”

If people could shake off their frustration so easily, the world would be a better place.

Totsugawa had lost momentum. Though all Elias did was stand there hesitantly, he threw three balls in a row. The next pitch was just narrowly a strike, but—

“Ball four!”

The fifth pitch veered far off mark and he ended up giving away another walk.

Elias, whose eyes went wide for an instant, strode to first base at the home plate umpire’s urging. It was his first baseball game, and his first trip to first base. Sara headed to second base.

Two outs, with first and second bases filled. It wasn’t looking good, but thankfully the next batter would change things.

“Three runs, three runs, lalala~♪ Hit and hit, but not a hit-and-run~♪”

Singing a carefree but somewhat morbid song, Chako-sensei stepped up to the plate. She was tone-deaf.

This lady rotated like a fan at whatever the pitcher threw, so any three throws would strike her out.

Certain of this, the catcher signed for a strike.

“All right!”

The ball flew at the catcher, as instructed. And just as he prepared to catch—

CLANG!

Chako-sensei hit it. The triumphant impact shook the grounds.

The ball flew clear over the right fielder’s head, and landed just past the line Kino’s ball had made it over.

“Sorry.” Chako-sensei apologized, ordering the stunned Sara and Elias to run.

They circled the diamond and all stepped on home plate. It almost felt like a funeral.

Take Action Now Club, 8. Baseball team, 0.

When the *kuroko* who had taken the plate for the second time that inning struck out in the blink of an eye, the Take Action Now Club's long, long offense was over.

Seven runs were scored in the top of the sixth, cycling through all of the Take Action Now Club members in the lineup.

The baseball team was on the offense starting in the bottom of the sixth, but there is something called a 'called game' in baseball.

No, it has nothing to do with phone calls. Or predicting the results. It's when the umpire makes a call to end the game.

In some cases, a called game occurs due to bad weather. But it also occurs when there is a very large point difference. This second case is better known.

In the case of high school baseball preliminaries, a seven-run difference or more past the seventh inning automatically results in a called game.

In other words, unless the baseball team got at least two runs in the next two innings, they were finished.

Batter 7 from the baseball team took the plate.

"Hah!"

"STRIKE!"

Kino was pumped up. She threw one strike after another.

Could they get two runs in the next two innings to avoid a called game? And even if they did, could they pull off nine runs to take victory?

"I doubt it." "Probably not." "Yeah." "Yeah." "Pretty much."

Something like resignation began to fill the team.

But the fact that they still looked at the bright side was the good thing about this baseball team—or maybe not, but anyway, they were used to losing.

"Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose." "Although we always lose." "Don't remind me." "Not like anyone needed a reminder." "True."

They were surprisingly calm.

The catcher wanted to try and cheer up Totsugawa. But,

"He's not here."

Totsugawa was nowhere to be found.

The catcher finally went to the manager for help.

"Hey, Yurippe. where's Tot-chan?"

Tot-chan is Totsugawa's nickname. Wait, did I even need to explain that?

"He said he had a stomachache and went to the bathroom. He asked the umpire to put the game on hold when his turn came up."

"I see..."

The catcher turned away, but stopped. Then he spoke again.

"Yurippe. You're the one who planned this game, right? So we could just have fun without worrying about the coach."

"That's right."

"The others are fine, but Totsugawa's the type to let it bother him. Could you go talk to him? Tell him to have fun and not to worry if we lose."

Yuri nodded firmly.

"All right. But it's a bit weird to tell him in front of everyone, so I'll go look for him."

"I'm counting on you. Give him a good kick in the pants if you have to."

"Haha! All right." Yuri replied, jogging over to the school building.

Then, she added,

"...I should tell him."

"Damn it..."

In the school, which was deserted because it was a Sunday, there was a boy with a grimace on his face.

I don't think it needs to be said, but it was Totsugawa.

He was in a hallway. It was very quiet.

Pressing down on his stomach and looking very pale, he stepped out of the bathroom and turned to the entrance, where he had left his cleats—

"Totsugawa-senpai!"

He heard a lovely voice. He turned and saw Yuri, running from further inside the building.

"Oh, Yurippe."

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you." She said, stopping in front of him with tears in her eyes.

"I was just in the—"

Just in the bathroom, he tried to say, but he stopped.

"What?"

Yuri was hugging him tightly. From the front. A very warm embrace.

"Don't push yourself, senpai!"

"Wha? What?"

"Even if we lose, it's not your fault!"

"What? But I—"

Totsugawa was so baffled by the situation that he was reduced to stammering. FYI, they've never dated or anything of the sort.

"You know... I was going to confess to you after the game. But... I'll tell you now!"

Was this a dream? Totsugawa gaped stupidly. He tried to get a hold of himself, but thinking that Yuri wouldn't notice as she buried her face in his sweaty uniform, he decided against it.

"Senpai, I love you! Please go out with me! I don't care if we win or lose... so let's talk, okay?"

"O-okay..."

"So don't give up. Do your best! Everyone else is giving it their all, right? The ace isn't supposed to go weak in the knees!"

What better encouragement could there be? Totsugawa could feel his nerves tingling.

"R-right!"

"I can't play with you, but I want to help the team... no! I want to help *you*!"

"Th-thank you, Yurippe!"

"Senpai, could you... just call me Yuri?"

"Thank you, Yuri!"

"I'm so happy..."

They embraced again.

They were practically shooting a teen romance drama in the deserted hallway. If this were a TV show, the camera was probably spinning around them and the main theme was playing in the background.

But Totsugawa had work to do back on the mound.

"Yuri... I have to go. Everyone's waiting."

He was the main character. With a dramatic line, he left Yuri's arms. Although he wanted to stay a little longer.

Yuri also took the love interest role in stride, her eyes watery.

"You can do it! If you lose heart, just remember that I'm with you. Accept me, and I'll cast a spell for victory!"

"I will, Yuri!" Totsugawa nodded.

"You should go ahead, senpai, or people will think something's up."

"Right!"

So the teen drama came to an end. Totsugawa put on his cleats and skipped into the sunlight.

After the match, a new life for him as Yuri's boyfriend awaited him. It may have been November, but it was springtime. They could go watch a movie together. Welcome to adolescence.

As Totsugawa passionately ran for the grounds,

"Are you feeling better, senpai? I wanted to tell—"

Someone tried to speak to him.

"Sorry, can't talk gotta go!"

But Totsugawa ignored the person and ran off.

"Hmph. What was that all about?"

The baseball team's manager, Yuri (Note: The real Yuri. Refers to a person who does not shoot cheesy teen dramas) puffed up her cheeks.

By the time Totsugawa returned to the bench, the eighth batter had struck out and everyone was waiting for him.

"Sorry."

Totsugawa apologized and took the plate.

"I can't lose!"

With all the passion he never had the previous inning, he shot Kino a fierce glare.

"I like that look. But don't think you'll win that easily."

Kino sounded like a real villain.

"I'm gonna do it!"

A blueprint for his turnaround victory popped into his head.

First, he would hit a home run and lift the team's spirits!

Now! Raise the flag of rebellion!

"STRIKE! OUT!"

What?

Totsugawa struck out in the blink of an eye.

He swung at three completely unnecessary throws with passion.

What? What? What?

He stood in a daze on the plate.

"Just one more inning, I guess." "Wanna go for some ramen after the game?"

Although they didn't mean to hurt him, the teammates' words broke Totsugawa's spirit.

"..."

Totsugawa headed for the mound. He looked like a different man.

His impassioned drive had deflated, leaving lifeless pallor. He stood at the top of the mound with all the tension of a walking corpse.

"It's over..."

He found himself muttering helplessly.

'It's over. This game was supposed to help bolster everyone's confidence, but I messed it all up and now people will call us weaklings who lost to a bunch of newbies.

'I'll go down in baseball history as the world's worst and most idiotic captain.'

The thoughts that had been circling his mind soon ran down his spine and began to run wild in his stomach.

"Urgh..."

Hanging his head, Totsugawa pressed on his gut.

If only someone would take the mound instead. If only someone else would be captain instead.

It felt like his heart would lose before they lost the game.

His heart—

"Ah!"

That was when he remembered.

"If you lose heart, just remember that I'm with you. Accept me, and I'll cast a spell for victory!"

He remembered her voice. Her warmth in his embrace.

"That's right... I'm not alone..."

Gripping the ball tightly in his right hand, Totsugawa whispered to himself.

"Yurippe—no, *my* Yuri is with me."

Using possessives so soon?

"She'll cast a magic spell!"

His eyes glinted.

"I'll do it! I'm going to give it my all until the very end!"

Raising his head, Totsugawa turned and called to the other teammates, minus the catcher.

"Guys! Let's all pull through to the end! Let's enjoy baseball together!"

It was a rousing speech, but the teammates did not understand.

That's because—

When Totsugawa turned around, he was a two-meter-tall demon. And because,

"Guohh! Graaaaah guoooah grrrrroar! Groarrrrr guohhhhh roaaaaaar!"

That was the only thing they heard out of his fearsome maw.

Chapter 4: The Diamond Shines Forever

~Rough Diamond~

Many things happened simultaneously in the seconds following Totsugawa's transformation.

First, the baseball team.

"I-it's a demon!" "Totsugawa, you dumbass!" "How could you fall to temptation?!" "Run!"

They reacted like normal people would, and scattered like normal people did whenever a demon ran amok.

The catcher, too.

"Shit!"

Even he couldn't do anything about this. He hurried to the bench on the third base-side.

"Totsugawa-senpai..."

And as Yuri whispered in a daze, the catcher grabbed her hand and dragged her behind the building.

"What about senpai?!"

"There's nothing we can do! I'm sure the warriors of justice will handle this!"

"But today's a day off—"

"...You're right. But there's nothing we can do."

"A-all right..."

Well, there's no way that a normal baseball team—or actually, normal students—could change things.

The entire team swiftly disappeared from sight. All that training really did pay off.

As for the Take Action Now Club,

"Whoa! A demon!"

Kino's forehead shone. She was holding a donut in her hands. But she could not interrupt a feeding frenzy. Munch munch. Yum.

"A demon. I've never seen a transformation in person." Shizu commented. "Everyone, stay calm and follow the edges of the grounds to evacuate. I'll buy you some time, so don't worry about me. Walk so you won't trip and fall."

Spoken like a true honors student. That sword he carries around is no toy—it's for times like this that he carries it around.

As for Inuyama—

“...”

He glared at Shizu from behind. It looks like he’s trying to see if this was his chance to finally take him down. It looks like he’s running all the simulations through his head. It’s nice to see that Inuyama never bothers trying to hide his intentions.

And as for Chako-sensei,

“EEEEEEEEEEEEK! It’s here! Ugh, it’s ugly! Something ugly showed up!”

The moment she saw the demon, she ran for her life. She left all her students behind and fled.

Her legs spun like a cartoon as she whooshed past, leaving a trail of dust.

Sara and Elias watched, mouths agape.

“Well, better than her getting spooked and getting in our way or something.” Kino admitted.

“Mm.” “Mm.” “Mm.”

The three *kuroko* reacted identically, quickly standing in front of Sara and Elias.

It looks like they were going to protect the students Chako-sensei had abandoned. They’re KAERE at heart after all. They’re not doing this job for nothing.

And as for the four people who were with neither the baseball team nor the Take Action Now Club—

“Play ball!”

It looks like they intended to keep going. Why aren’t they running?

“We are umpires. Even if it may cost us our lives.” The home plate umpire said solemnly. Where’d that awesome manliness suddenly come from?

“We are born umpires.”

How?

“Really. It’s in our baby books.”

Pics or it didn’t happen.

“All players, return to the game.”

“What do I do? What do I do?” Kino wondered, reaching for her fourth donut. It was filled with whipped cream and coated with chocolate.

"What do you mean? You have to transform and turn him back." Hermes said coolly from her belt.

"Mm hmm. Yeah, but—"

Still eating, Kino turned. Shizu had a hand on his waist and was prepared to draw. Inuyama stood quietly behind him.

"—there's too many people. Man, this is good."

Standing nervously behind them were Sara and Elias.

And the three *kuroko*, defending the two with determination clear in their eyes. (Editorial dept.: How?)

There were too many people. Kino could not transform here.

"GUUOOOOOAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

The demon was still standing on the mound. It hadn't taken a single step. But there was no guarantee that it would remain there. Naturally, Kino wanted to transform quickly.

"Munch munch. Wonder if I have a smoke grenade..."

Kino reached with her free hand into one of her pouches.

At that moment, everything got darker as an indescribable noise filled their ears. It was a low frequency, mixed with the roar of engines and the sound of blades cutting through the wind.

"Guoh?" "Hm?" "Hm?" "Hm?"

The demon, Kino, Shizu, and Inuyama looked up. There was a helicopter hovering overhead. A CH-53E Super Stallion. It was a massive helicopter twenty meters in length.

It must have flown very low to clear the school building, and had come to a sudden stop at the grounds to hover. It is very difficult to hear a helicopter if it is approaching from a very low altitude.

Upon closer inspection, they saw a circular sun design on the white body. It must be from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. It says so right there.

The blades swept up powerful gusts of wind across the grounds, creating dust clouds. The moment the clouds surrounded Kino, dropping visibility to two meters—

"I don't know what's going on, but this is your chance, Kino!" Hermes cried.

Kino cried, too.

"NOOOOOOO! My donut's covered in dirt! Hey, helicopter! What the heck were you thinking?! Get down here and pay me back for this poor donut! Now!"

"Never mind, Kino! Just transform now!"

Even Hermes got angry when he had to.

"Fine... I'm sorry, donut. I'm sorry I couldn't eat you."

Giving up on her donut, Kino gingerly placed it in front of the box as though burying a loved one (because she might still be able to eat it if she dusted it off), then reached for her holster.

Ta-dah! She drew the model revolver with her right hand. Cocking the gun, she raised her right hand high into the air, placed her left hand on her waist, and slightly bent her right knee.

"From my cold! Dead! Hands! V qba'g trg guvf ersrerapr!"

There's something a little different about her transformation catchphrase today...

She put pressure on her trigger finger. The gunpowder ignited.

Kino was surrounded by light.

Her sweats scattered, leaving behind a suspicious silhouette wearing nothing but a gun belt and a holster. But don't bother doing the frame-by-frame routine—it's not drawn in detail anyway.

The transformation BGM played, and uselessly beautiful colors drifted in the background. Sparkle sparkle.

A sailor uniform and sweatpants appeared out of nowhere and settled on the spinning Kino.

So she transforms into her school uniform no matter what she happens to be wearing, huh? The author just realized that himself.

The flood of light died down and the BGM came reached its climax.

"Transformation complete! Fight to avenge your food, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun fighter Rider Kino!" Hermes announced. Our hero is here! Our horrific Warrior of Justice!

—uh, I mean... *Terrific* Warrior of Justice!

"I *will* avenge my donut! Once I beat the demon, you're next, helicopter!"

I guess 'horrific' works too.

Perhaps it didn't want to be beaten by Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino—the helicopter began to ascend. The dust cloud slowly settled.

First, Kino and Hermes saw the blue sky and the school grounds.

"Argh!" "Huh."

Then they saw two men.

One was dressed in pure white—

A white school uniform and a white cape, with a katana at his side, a pair of white doggy ears on his head, and an apple between the ears.

I'm sure I don't have to spell it out for you. There's only one character in the whole world who goes around dressed like this weirdo. One is more than enough. On that note, it's not very often you get a word where the 'e' comes before the 'i'.

"Ahoy there, Mysterious Kino! You are late! I couldn't wait until the maiden of justice found herself in danger—sorry, I just couldn't wait." The man—Samoyed Mask said with an embarrassed smile. His pearly-white teeth gleamed in the sun. Stop talking like a college girl who just marched into her boyfriend's apartment in the middle of the night.

The other was dressed in pure black—

Black pants and black boots, along with a black coat and black sunglasses.

His description's notably shorter than Samoyed Mask's.

"..."

Standing there silently was Detective Wanwan.

It's kind of weird to say this, but as if in their stead, Shizu and Inuyama had disappeared. Where in the world had they gone? Oh, wait. Shizu is Samoyed Mask, so he must have stripped and clothed himself instantly into his current costume. But where could Inuyama be?

"Who cares? Maybe he ran off like Chako-sensei in the dust cloud. Good riddance." Kino concluded.

Let's just go with that.

In any case,

"Detective Wanwan! And—"

Kino spoke with both joy and despair.

"I am Samoyed Mask! S-A-M-O-Y-E-D M-A-S-K! Now, repeat after me!"

Samoyed Mask, growing more annoying by the second.

"I know that! I just don't want to say your name!" Kino howled.

"That can also be a sign of *love*."

"As if!"

"You're just embarrassed, aren't you? Feel free to call me 'darling'."

"Shut up!"

"Oh! So close!"

Kino and Samoyed Mask could become a comedy duo, if nothing else.

But Kino finally remembered that she had no time for comedy shows. Though late, she holstered her mysterious transformed model gun—Big Cannon~Shining Iron Demon Destroyer, which could turn demons back into human form but could only be used once per transformation—and turned.

"Sara! Elias!" She called.

The two students were so overwhelmed by the sudden crisis that they were standing around in a daze. but Elias quickly reacted.

"Yes, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino?" He replied, getting Kino's full title correct.

Elias has always been knowledgeable about these things—about Kino, Samoyed Mask, and Detective Wanwan—and Sara also met the three of them in the previous volume. Although they have no idea about the secret identity things. They couldn't possibly know.

Kino breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the *kuroko* were dutifully protecting the two.

"I'm going to turn that demon back, so I want you guys to get somewhere safe."

"O-okay."

Elias nodded. And still under the *kuroko*'s protection, he stepped forward as though shielding Sara.

"Good boy. Take care of her." Kino said, vaguely quoting something familiar. "Now, let's take care of this thing."

Free from worrying about innocent bystanders, Kino finally turned to the demon.

Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino.

Samoyed Mask.

Detective Wanwan.

Three heroes faced down the demon on the mound.

It was unusual, but this time they knew exactly who the demon was. It was Totsugawa. It had to be.

Kino pointed squarely at the demon.

"Hey, baseball-throwing senpai! Don't think your ploy to end the losing match by turning into a demon's gonna work on us!"

Samoyed Mask chimed in.

"You had an excellent game going, too. ...Uhh, I was just watching from the distance, I swear."

Even the quiet Detective Wanwan spoke up.

"It's not becoming of a man to throw a tantrum in the middle of a game."

"ROAAAAAAR!"

The demon was insulted. It howled and spun its arms as it lunged from the mound—ahem. It seems as though I've made a mistake. The demon did *not* lunge from the mound—

"Guohh, groaaaar!"

Surprisingly, the demon was pointing at home plate, where the home plate umpire still stood.

"Huh?" "Hm." "Hmm..."

The heroes stood in confusion, not knowing what the demon was getting at.

"GUOH!"

At that point, the demon suddenly pulled out its own fur and threw it into the air.

The warriors of justice sensed the monsters coming. They quickly prepared for battle. And just as they expected, the hairs turned into monsters. They were the same heights as humans, and had arms and legs. They were like bipedal dogs. But strangely enough, there were only eight of them.

Didn't most demons make at least two hundred right off the bat?

As our heroes looked on, the eight monsters scattered. Seven into the infield and outfield, and one to home plate.

They went to each of the bases, and the other positions. Upon closer inspection, Kino found that the monsters each had baseball gloves on their hands.

"GROOOOOOAR!"

The demon howled proudly.

Even Kino, who only ever thought of eating—

"What?"

Ahem. Kino, with her sharp eyes and keen wit, could see what it was getting at.

"So you wanna settle things with a baseball game! You weren't throwing a tantrum!" Kino cried.

"I see. This is getting interesting." Detective Wanwan commented.

"Heh. It still hasn't lost its pride." Samoyed Mask grinned.

"We continue the game. Batter, step up to the plate."

This umpire from Yahoo! Auctions has balls of steel.

"It's decided, then! Just as the demon and monsters play on behalf of the baseball team, we warriors of justice will take the place of the Take Action Now Club. We swear to finish this game with all our love, friendship, and youth, fighting to the bitter end!"

Samoyed Mask declared out of nowhere, his right hand held high.

"Then to the plate. We resume the game from the top of the seventh inning." The umpire said.

Suddenly, the demon threw a practice pitch.

No one knew where it had been hiding the black ball—it didn't look like a baseball, but was exactly the same size.

The demon wound up and threw.

Whoosh. Thud.

The *whoosh* was the sound of the ball cutting through the air.

The *thud* was the sound of the catcher monster catching the ball.

"Th-that was fast..." Kino gasped. What was that just now?

It had only taken an instant for the ball to leave the demon's hand and end up in the catcher's glove. It was, literally, in the blink of an eye. Like a black line had suddenly been drawn in midair.

"That ball just now—"

"250 kilometers an hour." Hermes said.

"No way!"

160 was the record set by a professional baseball player. This was outrageous. It was on the same level as the shinkansen.

"Incidentally, the ball's made of something really hard and sturdy."

One dead ball might spell death for the warriors. It could even fly right through their bodies.

Kino turned.

"Sara. Elias."

"Yes?" "Yes?"

"And you three *kuroko*—Sendai, Morioka, and Aomori."

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes."

Wait, were those their names?

"As you can see, you're finished here. It's out turn now... so get somewhere safe and wish us luck."

In other words, Kino was shooing them away. She couldn't let innocent bystanders be harmed.

"O-okay..." Sara replied. Elias and the *kuroko* nodded firmly.

Suddenly, one of the *kuroko* spoke up.

"Oh, look. There's a piece of bulletproof glass 10 centimeters thick, 3 meters wide, and 5.5 meters long over here—it's shaped like a U and it's even got a cover."

"What a wonderful coincidence."

"Let's make use of it."

The other two piped up, and moved the extraordinarily heavy piece of glass with a small crane that just happened to be on the grounds. They also placed a sturdy metal divider that they happened to find in front of the benches by first base.

The *kuroko* sheltered Sara and Elias safely behind it.

"That's one load off my shoulders." Kino sighed, relieved. Now Sara and Elias would be safe from errant balls.

Oh? It looks like there's another piece of bulletproof glass set up on the other benches. The monsters had worked together to make it.

Please don't think too hard about why there would be bulletproof glass and cranes lying around the school grounds. Things like this happen sometimes.

"All right, I accept your challenge! Let's get this game started!"

"GUOOOOH!"

And so began the second round of the Take Action Now Club vs. the Baseball Team(inaccurate).

Ta-dah.

"Play ball!"

The umpire solemnly announced the resumption of the game. Kino stepped up to home plate.

Kuroko 2—uhh, Tsukishima? Was supposed to be batting, but they could not let an ordinary human to make an attempt here. So Kino, Detective Wanwan, and Samoyed Mask would take everyone's place, in that order.

Kino put on her helmet and picked up her metal bat.

"Gimme all you got!"

Kino faced down the demon. The demon raised its arm.

Time for a good, honest—*thud*.

"What?"

"Strike one!"

The moment Kino raised her bat, something like a shadow crossed past her stomach. The black ball was nestled in the catcher's glove.

"Huh? Wait, did he throw?" Kino asked the umpire.

"It was a perfect strike. An excellent throw." The umpire replied matter-of-factly.

That was fast. Too fast. Is this umpire even human?

Kino found herself screaming.

"I CAN'T SEE IIIIIIIIIIIIT!"

"That one was 500 kilometers per hour." Hermes said matter-of-factly.

"That's double the speed from before!"

"Yeah. You're a human calculator, Kino."

"Do you *want* me to crush you between my fingers?"

"Sorry."

"Damn it! He was holding back before!" Kino complained. At that moment, the demon wound up again.

"Just try!" Kino raised her bat and kept her eyes trained on the demon's—*thud*.

"Strike two!"

Kino blinked. She didn't even have a chance to move her bat.

"500 kilometers per hour again."

"Argh! I almost saw this one!"

Gritting her teeth, Kino prepared for the third pitch.

And she stared for the moment the ball left the demon's hand. She stared a hole through the hand. She focused to her absolute limit.

Just like she did when she ate.

A professional food-lover can tell in an instant what combination of side dishes and main dishes is necessary to draw the best flavor out of a meal.

"Hah! I see it!"

Kino's superhuman focus and sight finally locked onto the ball. Even the fastest throws become clearer after two or three throws.

The third throw was also going to be a strike. But Kino could do it. She could hit it.

"I can do it!"

Kino swung. The tip of her bat broke the sound barrier.

Crunch.

Thud.

"Huh?"

For your information, the *crunch* was the sound of the metal bat breaking. The *thud* was the sound of the catcher receiving the ball.

"Strike! OUT!"

That was a foul tip. Kino had struck out.

"No way!"

For the first time in four chances in the batter's box, Kino had struck out. She was, understandably, furious.

She looked at her broken bat.

"What...?"

There was a ball-shaped hole through it. Like it had been cut with a knife. Kino could probably cut something with the bat.

"I can't hit anything with a broken weapon!"

It's not a weapon.

But it was true that a broken bat was no use in a baseball game.

"Hm."

Detective Wanwan, who was next in line, as well as—

"Hm."

—Samoyed Mask, who was after, swung on the third throw once their senses had adjusted. They each broke a bat.

It was time to switch.

The bottom of the seventh.

"It's not gonna be easy, defending with just three people."

Kino was right. Three people could not cover the same amount of ground as nine.

Kino was the pitcher. Detective Wanwan was the catcher. And as for the rest—

"HAAHAHAHA! Even on my own, I can catch *anything*! Lalalala!"

—a suspicious man wearing a white cape with a katana at his side, hopping about the infield. Children should not be watching this travesty.

"If we don't give 'em more than one run, it'll be a called game. Right?" Kino asked Hermes.

"Yeah. So if you're lucky, you just might win after three outs."

"All right."

The demon's black ball was lying on the mound. Kino picked it up.

"Whoa, this is heavy."

It was. The ball probably belonged in shot put more than baseball. It looked metallic, but was somewhat elastic as well. Above all, it was heavy.

"I can't lose!"

Our hot-blooded warrior of justice was not cowed by such things.

"I *will* avenge my donut!"

Oh, so not for the greater good, then.

"C'mon out, batters! I'll strike you all out! I'll break your bats!" Kino declared loudly. If a demon could do it, so could she. Their flimsy metal bats couldn't hit this ball.

A monster stood in the batter's box. It was wearing its helmet like a good boy.

In its hands was a large, thick black bat.

"What? Where'd that come from?" Kino asked. That bat obviously didn't belong to the baseball team. It was about twice as thick and large. It looked kind of strong and magnificent.

"Isn't this a little underhanded? Hey, referee! Isn't that bat against the rules or something?" Kino complained. Why didn't she complain like this about the *ball*?

"Hmm..."

The umpire gravely fell into thought. Then,

"Now that I think about it, we didn't do a mutual equipment check before the game. If we followed the rules to the letter, we *should* have done so. But since the game has already started, any equipment goes. A man does not go back on his word."

"WHAT?!"

Kino's complaints continued for a minute and thirty seconds, but the umpire refused to budge. The demon and the monsters, meanwhile sat in a row on their bench and waited patiently. How polite of them.

"Play ball!"

In the end, Kino was left with no choice. She swung, aiming for Inuyama's glove—

"Hah!"

And threw the stupidly heavy ball.

Thanks to her justice-enhanced warrior of justice muscles, Kino managed a 200-kilometers-per-hour throw. She couldn't lose. Not to a demon.

"Take that!"

It was a weighty ball aimed squarely at the strike zone. Hit it if you can!

CLANG!

"Huh?"

The monster hit it. The mysterious bat neither broke nor snapped.

"Oh. Even I can't catch that."

As Samoyed Mask looked on from near second base, the ball passed approximately 53 meters overhead and hit the school pool's diving board, disintegrating it.

The swimming club would shed tears if they could see this. It was a perfect home run. Kino let slip a home run for the very first time.

"NO!"

As Kino stamped her feet on the mound, the monster stepped on every base as it circled the baseball diamond and returned to home plate.

Take Action Now Club 8, Demon Baseball Team 1.

The Take Action Now Club's dreams of a no-hit-no-run game and a perfect game went down the drain.

"Urgh... Grrr..."

Kino ground her teeth in anger and trembled. She was overflowing with passion for the game.

"Now I won't get the extra prize!"

Oh, the one Chako-sensei promised her. Sorry. It looks like this protagonist really only cares about food.

As Kino raged, Samoyed Mask came up to her.

"Should I pitch?"

"No. This is no time to be panicking!" Kino said defiantly, shaking her head. She glared at the next batter.

The new ball the demon handed to the home plate umpire went to Inuyama, then to Kino.

As long as Kino did not give them another run, the game would end. A perfect game was impossible now, but they could still end things off with the starting pitcher throwing a complete game.

Incidentally, I accidentally wrote 'the starting pitcher throwing a party'. Which party comes first into *your* mind?

Kino threw at the monster.

CLANG!

"Ah—"

Another home run. This time, the shower building next to the pool was destroyed.

That makes the score 8:2.

Kino refused to back down. She kept throwing.

"GOOOOOO!"

CLANG!

"HYAH!"

CLANG!

"AAAAAARGH!"

CLANG!

"ARGH! DAMMIT!"

Kino looked up.

The monsters had pulled off five home runs in a row.

The vicinity of the swimming pool and the tennis court looked like they had been recently bombed. The water from the pool was flowing out into the grounds.

"Kino..." "Kino..."

Elias and Sara whispered behind the bulletproof glass, concerned for her.

Unable to take any more, Detective Wanwan the catcher jogged over to the mound.

"Are you all right?"

"For now, but... damn it!"

"Calm down, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino. From now on, do as I say."

"Yeah?"

Whisperwhisper. Detective Wanwan is whispering something in her ear. *Whisperwhisper.*

"Aha! That's a plan!"

Kino's eyes sparkled like the stars, before giving way to worry.

"But wouldn't that put you in danger?"

"Don't worry. I have faith in you."

"..."

Although Detective Wanwan's eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses, Kino sensed something resolute in his eyes.

"All right. I have faith in you too."

She nodded.

"Then have faith in *me*, too! Trust me!" Samoyed Mask said, suddenly popping up behind her. A lone dove flew future him. Uh, I mean, past him.

Disgusted, Kino ordered him:

"Go back and do your job."

Back to the game.

Batter 6 was a monster that looked identical to the rest. It was holding the aforementioned black bat, and was standing proudly.

"..."

Kino stared at Detective Wanwan.

"..."

Detective Wanwan nodded firmly.

Kino raised her hand.

"Yah!"

And she threw.

This was another throw straight to the middle. The monster seemed to grin.

"Try this!" Kino suddenly dared, and reached into her pouch. She pulled out an IMI Desert Eagle. One of the most powerful handguns on the market, it uses .50 Action Express rounds .

Bang. Bang. Bang. Kino fired with her right hand.

The bullets followed after the ball—

Would they turn the monster to dust? No, not at all. Just before the monster swung, the bullets struck the ball and changed its course.

Whoosh!

The monster hit nothing but thin air.

Thud!

Detective Wanwan easily caught the ball.

"Strike one!"

The solemn umpire declared solemnly.

"Whooohoo!" Kino cheered from the mound. "Try hitting *that!*"

She's back.

"GUOOOH! Roar! GAOHHH!"

The demon ran over from the bench and howled at the umpire.

"Grrrr... GROAR! RRAGH!"

It was hard to hear what it was saying, but the gestures were enough. The demon must be complaining that the use of a gun to change the course of the throw is against the rules.

Yet the home plate umpire refused to be intimidated by the demon, even as it towered over him.

"I understand what you are trying to say, but I don't believe there were any rules that stated, 'no use of firearms'."

Obviously.

"Grrr..."

The demon had no choice but to return to the bench.

"Hah."

Kino threw the ball. Then she shot it.

"Strike two!"

The ball curved in an impossible direction in midair. With her incredible sharpshooting skills, Kino could easily control the ball's trajectory. Hers was a truly demonic pitch.

Detective Wanwan seemed to be able to calculate the trajectory of the ball. Each time the monster swung, he managed to catch the ball.

"Strike! Out!"

Finally, the batter was out.

"All right! I just have to keep going!"

After giving up five runs in the seventh inning, Kino managed to strike out three monsters.

She didn't forget to clean up the fallen shell casings as she left the mound.

The score was 8 to 5. There was no more danger of a called game at this point.

Whatever happened, there were two innings left.

Kino, Detective Wanwan, and Samoyed Mask returned to the protected bench where Sara and Elias waited for a strategy meeting.

There was nothing they could do about the five lost runs. No one blamed Kino. The most important thing now was to defend their lead and increase the difference as much as possible.

They managed to come up with a plan this time, but there was no guarantee that shooting the balls to throw them off-course would work next time. The demon and his crew would come up with a counter-strategy.

"Our priority should be to get as many runs as possible." Detective Wanwan said. Everyone nodded.

"Then we need a weapon. We need the best bat we can get." Samoyed Mask said. Everyone nodded. Their plain metal bat couldn't possibly hit the heavy ball. It was like fighting the final boss with a wooden stick.

But there was no way that the demon's baseball team would lend them the bat.

"Maybe if we asked?" Elias suggested tentatively.

"No way!" Kino raised her voice, about to say that something that stupid would never happen.

Whoosh. Thud.

Something flew over to the Take Action Now Club's bench and pierced the ground in front of the bulletproof glass.

Everyone stared. The object was driven about fifty centimeters into the ground.

"Look!" Elias cried, his eyes glinting. There was the black bat.

"Ha!"

Kino and the others turned to the other bench.

The demon had its right hand raised up high.

As though it was saying, 'Bring it on'.

"Heh. Giving salt to the enemy⁶, I see. A large salt intake is critical to your health, but too little is just as dangerous. In order to avoid dehydration, it is a good idea to mix in small quantities of salt into your drinking water. And sprinkling salt onto watermelon sweetens the flavor." Samoyed Mask explained, his teeth glinting.

"Interesting. We'll make them regret this." Detective Wanwan grinned.

"So whoever pulls that out becomes the next King of England?" Kino wondered, completely lost.

Time for the eighth inning to begin.

Kino was up first.

"Wow, this is hefty."

The legendary bat from the demon's side was obviously heavy. What in the world could it be made of? It took the warriors of justice a lot of effort to even pull it out of the ground.

If the transformed Kino felt it was heavy, then the bat was probably too much for most humans.

⁶ 'Giving salt to the enemy' is a Japanese saying that refers to playing fair.

But with this weight and density, the bat could definitely withstand the demon's pitches.

Several practice swings later,

"All right, do your worst!"

Kino stepped into the batter's box.

The demon pitcher threw.

"I'll hit it!"

Kino put all her weight into her swing. There!

But just before it hit the bat, the ball began to shift suspiciously. It wobbled as though it was dancing, and it almost looked like there were multiple balls in the air.

"Huh?"

The ball hit the tip of Kino's bat and flew straight at her. It smashed through her helmet with ease and flew into her head.

"ARGH!"

Kino spun and flew three meters backwards.

It was a sad sight. And a foul. So that was strike one.

"Ouch... ow... I hit myself..."

Tiny chicks were spinning around her head, but Kino stood. She would have been a goner if she wasn't transformed.

"A formidable demonpitch. It seems that I'll be the only one who could make a hit."
Samoyed Mask said confidently from the bench, sipping the tea Sara handed him.

"Hmph." Detective Wanwan snorted. "Anyone could hit that throw starting from the second pitch onward. Both me and Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino."

"Is that so? I look forward to seeing what you can do."

"So you acknowledge that you're making a childish mistake."

The two heroes didn't bother acting friendly. Elias tensed.

"Heh."

A smile just rose to Kino's face. She flung off her useless helmet.

"Give it your best shot!"

She picked up the heavy bat.

The second pitch. The ball seemed to multiply yet again.

"If you think you're getting away with that, I'm getting away with this! Get away? This? That?" Kino raised her voice, swinging her bat.

What? It looks like the bat is multiplying.

"Ah! That's the anti-demonpitch swing! That was what I was going to do!" Samoyed Mask cried, rising from his seat with tea in hand. Without spilling a drop. This is what it means to be Samoyed Mask.

"..."

Detective Wanwan smiled quietly.

"What's going on?" Asked Sara.

"I don't get it, either." Elias replied. Samoyed Mask quickly began to draw a diagram on a whiteboard provided by the *kuroko*.

First, he drew a baseball that seemed to have multiplied.

"Let me explain. Although we don't know how, that demonpitch looks to have split into multiple balls. Although of course, there is only really one ball."

"Right." "Right."

Sara and Elias nodded.

Then, Samoyed Mask went on to draw Kino standing in the batter's box. He was an incredible artist.

"Maybe I should up her bust size?"

Why don't you ask her?

"Let's not. I don't want to die. So what she's doing now is—"

Samoyed Mask drew her bat—it looked as though it had multiplied.

"—she is shaking the bat so it looks like there are multiple of them. In this state, she is able to hit the demonpitch. Does that make sense to you?"

"It makes sense." "I get it!"

Sara and Elias smiled. It looks like Samoyed Mask has a talent for teaching.

"I will tell you many times today that there's nothing more important than the basics."

With that, he put a lid on his marker and placed it under the whiteboard. That was when Kino hit the ball.

I'm sure someone will raise a fuss about temporal progression and all that, but please don't worry about it.

CLAAAAANG!

The heavy ball made contact with the bat.

"Argh! That's heavy!"

It really was. Kino got in a solid hit, but the ball rolled toward the shortstop. It was an infield grounder.

"Dammit. I'll hit harder next time."

Kino still ran. She ran with all her strength.

The infielder demon grabbed the ball and quickly threw to first base.

"No!"

Even as she ran, Kino could see the ball. At this rate, she would be taken out. She had to avoid that at all costs.

"I can't let you do that!"

Kino took out a Remington Model 870 shotgun from her pouch. It's one of the most common shotguns, and uses 12 gauge cartridges.

Bang! Click. Bang! Click. Bang! Click.

Kino pulled the trigger. The 'bang' is the sound of gunfire, and the 'click' is the sound of reloading.

Six slugs were fired with each pull of the trigger. They hit the first basemonster and turned him to dust.

The ball passed through thin air. Kino easily made it to first base.

"Whew. That was close."

Standing at the base, Kino put the Remington back into her pouch.

"Grrrr... Roar! Guoooooh! Groaaaaar!"

The demon used every gesture it knew as it furiously complained at the umpire.

Isn't shooting a defenseman against the rules? It seemed to be saying.

"Hm. There's no rule in baseball that states that one is forbidden to shoot an opposing defenseman and turn him to dust, but—"

It would be scary if there was.

“—if I permit any more of these actions, the baseball game will end up turning into a battle. I’ll let this one slide, but any further attacks on the defense, be it with guns or swords, will be deemed an interference and any offending player will be declared out.”

That’s the verdict.

“Grr.”

The demon seemed to accept the judgement. It pulled out another hair and threw it. The hair turned into a monster. Happy birthday to our new first baseman.

The new rule was relayed to Kino.

“What? Oh. Okay.”

She was very disappointed, but the astonished people on the Take Action Now Club’s bench sighed in relief. At least she got to keep the base. Even Kino knew that getting to a base increased the team’s chances of scoring runs.

If Detective Wanwan or Samoyed Mask hit a home run, they could score two or three runs in one go. Mwahaha.

Detective Wanwan, who was headed for the batter’s box, and Samoyed Mask, preparing for his turn, knew that well.

The demon’s pitches were incredibly fast, but not impossible to counter. Its lending the bat was just a show of sportsmanship, but the warriors of justice would make it regret that mercy.

“Grooooooaaar!”

The demon on the mound howled mockingly.

“Hmph.”

Detective Wanwan snorted. But,

“What?”

He could not hide his shock at the demon’s next move.

“Guoooooh!”

The demon began to throw intentional balls. It ordered the catcher monster to stand, then threw slow balls at places Detective Wanwan could not reach. (Still at over 50 kilometers an hour, though).

“BALL!”

“Damn it...”

After the fourth ball, the disgruntled Detective Wanwan headed for first base.

Samoyed Mask, who took up the bat and stood in the left batter’s box,

"Not good."

Also realized how much danger they were in.

The demon pitched again. Another ball.

"The demon's got us." One of the *kuroko* commented.

Sara and Elias asked him to explain why.

"If he lets that extravagantly-dressed man named Samoyed Mask get a walk to first base, then we'll be at zero outs with the bases loaded. It's a good thing, in most cases. But for us..."

"Oh!" "Oh!"

"That's right. We only have three people on the offensive right now. In other words, there aren't any batters left."

The umpire announced four balls, and Samoyed Mask walked to first base.

Zero outs. The bases were loaded.

It was a perfect chance for the Take Action Now Club.

"There's no batters left! I'm supposed to be up next!" Kino finally realized. She was supposed to bat, but she was stuck at third base.

"Wait! Umpire!"

"What is it?"

"What do we do now?"

"If you don't have anyone to bat, you forfeit the game for lack of players. You would lose, 0 to 9."

They've been short six people ever since they started playing against the demon. Didn't *anyone* notice?

"That doesn't matter."

Okay.

"Argh... what to do?"

As Kino held her head in her hands, Samoyed Mask suddenly called to her from first base.

"Ahoy there! Mysterious Kino!"

"Stop calling me that! And what do you want?"

"Shoot the glass... I mean, shoot the monster."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter which; shoot any monster. He is barefoot."

"Uh... you want me to shoot a monster? And not you?"

"Calm down. What would you gain from shooting me?"

"I'm calm. And I always want to shoot you."

"There's a point when your attempts to cover up your embarrassment end up almost sounding rude—"

"I'm not embarrassed. And you're always rude."

"Setting that aside, you must shoot a monster."

"What? Then I'd be out."

Kino tilted her head. Hermes kindly explained.

"He means you should get yourself out so you can bat for us. Otherwise we'd lose the game. Go on."

"I get it. I guess I have no choice..."

Kino took out a Colt Python .357 caliber revolver(the 4-inch model).

"Hah."

She shot the monster on third base right next to her. Over and over again. The monster scattered to dust.

"Runner out!" The third base umpire declared.

Kino returned to home plate and stepped into the batter's box again. One out, with players on first and second base.

But—

"NOT AGAIN!"

Naturally, Kino was the one on the receiving end of a base on balls. The umpire had declared four balls before she could blink.

There was nothing they could do.

Detective Wanwan reached third base—a pair of Micro-Uzi submachine guns slid out of his sleeves. Then he opened fire at the recently-revived third basemonster. Shell casings danced in the air, sparkling all the way to the ground.

But even if he stepped into the batter's box, the outcome was as clear as day. Another base on balls. What kind of game is this?

"I suppose we have no other choice."

They could not forfeit now. Samoyed Mask drew his katana.

"HA!"

The target of his blade was the poor beleaguered third basemonster. It was cut clean in two.

And that was three outs.

The Take Action Club ended their offense without a single run. The score was still 8 to 5.

The bottom of the eighth. The demon baseball team was on the offense.

The demon finally stepped up with the bat. It filled the entire batter's box.

"You're finally up."

Kino glared at it from the mound.

They had discussed what to do during the strategy meeting earlier. The conclusion was that they would stick with the last-second curve pitches for the time being.

Kino pitched. Then she quickly changed course with a shot—

"ROAR!"

CLANG!

Once again,

"Dammit!"

The ball flew over both Kino,

"If only I could fly~"

And Samoyed Mask. It was a clean home run. The ball drove itself into the bottom of the now-empty swimming pool.

Their strategy was a failure. They had expected it somewhat, but the opponent had come up with a counter after all.

The demon's plan was to wait until the last second before swinging. It waited long enough that Kino could not hold back the shot any longer.

There was no meaning to a curve ball if the curve happened before the batter swung. It was a technique only the demon could pull off, with its incredible reflexes and strength. The ball easily cleared the outfield.

Kino could potentially hold off the shot a little longer, but that would endanger Detective Wanwan. She did not want to end up shooting him.

The demon returned to home plate. The score was 8 to 6.

The demon came into the baseball team's bench.

"Guoh! Graah!"

It exchanged high-fives with the monsters. Sure looks smug, huh?

"Damn it..."

Kino was beginning to look nervous. Detective Wanwan came up to the mound for another strategy session.

Maybe only the demon was capable of that high-caliber move. They would see if the next batter could do the same.

"Hah!"

Kino threw. Then shot the ball.

CLANG!

"Not again!"

The monster also managed to hit the ball. A home run, at that. The pitch was a failure after all. That made the score 8 to 7. They were fresh out of savings.

"Should I take over, pitcher? You must be fatigued." Samoyed Mask offered, hopping over to the mound.

"I don't need your pity, dammit! I'll never give up!" Kino refused. "I won't get my food if I don't pitch the whole game!"

So that's it, huh.

But it was clear that they were in trouble. At this rate, they would give away one run after another until they lost. What to do? Kino ground her teeth.

"Detective Wanwan. We switch."

This time, Samoyed Mask walked normally to home plate.

"What's your game?" Detective Wanwan asked suspiciously, getting to his feet. Samoyed Mask answered quite seriously.

"Tell Mysterious Kino, 'You may shoot to your heart's content'."

"Wha—"

Detective Wanwan realized what he meant.

"..."

And though he was clearly frustrated, he handed his gear to Samoyed Mask

On his way to the outfield, Detective Wanwan said to Kino,

"He says you can shoot all the curve balls you like. Because he'll never die of just a few gunshot wounds."

He was furious that Samoyed Mask could do something he couldn't; but he didn't let it show.

"I see!"

Kino understood. Samoyed Mask could parry the bullets with his katana if things came down to it.

"And even if I hit him a few times, I'd like to think that I have that right! For all the times he screwed up!"

What an awful protagonist.

The game resumed.

"Here goes!"

"Go, Mysterious Kino! With love!"

"No such thing!"

After pitching at the demon, Kino waited until the last second before shooting her Desert Eagle.

The result was the most powerful curve ball yet.

But the bullets ricocheted and headed ruthlessly toward Samoyed Mask.

"Hmph."

Clang clang clang clang.

He deflected them with ease. Even while in position as the catcher, using his katana to parry all the projectiles was a piece of cake.

The monster swung.

Whoosh!

"Strike one!"

Yes!

Kino threw the second pitch with gusto. But—

CLANG!

It looks like the curve was a little weak. The monster got a hit—and a home run, to boot. The score was tied.

"Don't worry, Mysterious Kino. You must concentrate! We simply have to win back those lost runs!"

It was difficult for Kino to accept criticism and encouragement from Samoyed Mask, but she had no choice but to keep going.

"Dammit."

Even for Kino, it was no easy feat to pitch 200-kilometers-an-hour balls and shoot them with sniperlike precision.

But she had no other choice.

"Kino..."

"Everyone..."

As Sara and Elias looked on from the benches supportively, the warriors of justice continued to fight.

After losing home runs and striking out batters,

"Strike! OUT!"

The eighth inning finally came to a close. The baseball team had taken four runs.

Take Action Now Club 8, Baseball Team 9. The tables had turned.

And whether they laughed or cried, coming up next was the ninth—and final—inning.

If the warriors of justice didn't score at least one run, they would be defeated.

"Damn it!"

Kino could not hide her frustration as she returned to the bench. But she didn't lob her glove at things or kick stuff around her. That's just bad sportsmanship.

"Good job. Here, have some tea." Sara offered.

"Thanks!" Kino drained it at once. "I can't believe they turned things around. Grr..."

As Kino ground her teeth,

"What will you do, Mysterious Kino?" Samoyed Mask asked, also holding a cup of tea from Sara.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, will you continue the match?"

"..."

Everyone shut their mouths. The bench was enveloped in silence. In other words, it got quiet.

Kino knew very well what Samoyed Mask meant.

Kino was a warrior of justice. If she wanted to, she could easily shoot the demon with Big Cannon~Shining Iron Demon Destroyer and turn him human again. She could overpower any monsters that got in her way with her arsenal.

And to be frank, it would be a piece of cake to snipe the demon as it headed from the baseball team's bench to the mound.

But,

"Non." Kino said. In French, for some reason. "We're playing to the end. Whether we win or lose."

She reached into a box of donuts.

Then, she took hold of a crispy donut that had survived the dust storm.

Stuffing it into her mouth, she declared:

"Mmmph! Mmmmmh! Mmmmmph!"

It was the top of the ninth.

Kino was batting first.

She stepped into the batter's box with the black bat in hand. If they didn't get at least a single run, they would be defeated. If they didn't get at least two, they could not win. Although two runs was not nearly enough for them to feel safe.

If the demon threw more bases on balls, the warriors of justice would surely lose. Then there was only one option.

"I'll hit it!"

"ROAR!"

The demon pitched defiantly. The ball was headed about a meter away from the strike zone. Yes. You know what this one is, folks.

"Not if I can help it!" Kino cried.

At the same time, she leapt gracefully into the air. Yes. She jumped.

The batter's feet are not allowed to leave the batter's box, but there was nothing wrong with batting in midair. Just as long as her feet were where they were supposed to be at the moment of impact.

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

Kino threw herself to the side as she swung.

Clang!

The ball just narrowly hit the tip of the bat. It began to roll toward third base. This was as far as she could send it while swinging in midair.

"All right!"

Breaking out of her roll, Kino quickly got to her feet and ran. The third basemonster stampeded forward and threw to first base.

Could Kino make it? It was a tough call.

Thud. Immediately after Kino rushed in like a gust of wind, there came the sound of the ball hitting the first basemonster's glove.

"Safe!" The umpire called. Yes! Kino made it to first base!

"Yes!" Kino cried. She raised her right arm at the bench.

Look, a hit! This was a sign of things to come. The Take Action Now Club strikes back!

"Whoohoo!" Kino cheered.

"Hey, Kino?" Hermes suddenly spoke up.

"What is it, Hermes?"

"You know..."

"Yeah?"

"I know you tried really hard to get here, but you know there wasn't much of a point to getting to first base, right?"

"Why not?"

"The demon was going to give you a walk to first base anyway. You could have gotten here without lifting a finger."

Kino thought. She thought some more. And then some. Something terrifying came to mind.

"..."

It looks like she's got it.

That there was no meaning to anything but a home run at this point.

"Then... what about all my hard work?"

"All for nothing."

"..."

It looks like the protagonist is depressed. Please hold.

Detective Wanwan was up next. He knew exactly what they were getting into, so he didn't try too hard.

He knew that, even if he managed to hit the pitch, it would be difficult to hit the heavy ball out of the park.

No matter how frustrating, Detective Wanwan never wasted effort on useless things. It must have taken a lot of practice.

Not a loser. Definitely not.

"Ball four!"

Detective Wanwan coolly let the ball pass by before walking to first base.

"My turn."

Samoyed Mask stood from the bench.

He slowly looked round and at someone, from under his mask.

And he said in a dandy voice:

"We're counting on you. You will be the hero of this game."

The person gaped.

"You know what you're capable of, don't you?"

"..."

"It's up to you now."

With that, Samoyed Mask left the safety of the bulletproof glass with a swish of his cape. He departed like a white wind.

"Ball four!"

Another base on balls. Samoyed Mask walked to first base.

The Take Action Now Club had zero outs, and the bases were loaded. This was their chance.

If it were normal baseball, anyway.

The Take Action Now Club also only had three members. They were repeating the previous inning. If Kino didn't get herself out so she could bat, they would forfeit by default.

"Grr...!"

Stamping her feet at third base, Kino shot the monster next to her a glare.

'I'll blow away that adorable mug!'

Kino reached into her pouch to take out a PSG-1 sniper rifle.

"Wait, Mysterious Kino."

"Whaddaya want, Samoyed Mask? I'm a bit busy here!"

"Our next batter is on the way."

'What is this creep thinking?' Kino thought.

"Who is the next batter?" The home plate umpire called.

"It's me." Said a solemn voice.

"Hm?" Kino turned.

"Hm." Detective Wanwan as well.

"What?!" Sara looked at the boy reaching for the black bat lying on the ground.

"Heh." Samoyed Mask grinned.

"I'll do it."

It was at that very moment that a blond-haired boy took hold of the bat.

"Elias?! Wait! Time out!" Kino quickly called. She left third base and went over to Elias.

"Wait, wait! You can't be out here!" She scolded him, but Elias slowly picked up the bat, ignoring her.

The bat was supposed to be too heavy for normal people to hold.

"Hey, Elias?"

Kino looked into his eyes.

"..."

She had no choice but to back down after seeing the look on his face. It was pure determination.

Kino had made that face in the past herself. Right before an eating contest.

"I'll do it. For victory." Elias said.

"...I see."

That was all Kino could say.

'I'm counting on you.'

But instead of saying that out loud, she lightly waved her right hand and returned to third base.

It was the top of the ninth.

There was just a single-run difference between the teams.

Elias was in the batter's box.

A gust of wind blew dust into the sky.

"..."

It also shook Elias's messy hair.

Kino was on third base. Detective Wanwan was on second. Samoyed Mask was on first. And Sara was on the bench. All four of them swallowed their breaths.

"Guoh."

The demon intoned quietly, then raised its arm.

Then, it threw. It was a powerful pitch, its speed at over five hundred kilometers an hour.

THUD!

The catcher monster was pushed back slightly by the impact.

"Strike one!"

Elias did not swing.

"..."

He just quietly watched.

"Hermes, wasn't that a strike just now?"

"Yeah. It's kinda obvious, but they're trying to strike him out."

"Then what happens?"

"You're gonna have to bat again."

"Dammit..."

The demon was cold and calculating. It planned to win through baseball.

Not even Kino or Hermes knew how much of its sense of self a demon retained when it transformed from a human. Although it probably didn't have any left.

"But you know one exception, Kino." Hermes said meaningfully.

"Hm..." Kino nodded gravely. Then, "who?"

Hermes was disappointed. Very much so.

"I'm talking about Elias! Did you already forget what happened last time?"

"Oh, right! Now that I think about it, I never shot him with Big Cannon." Kino mumbled thoughtfully.

"Yeah." Hermes was relieved that she finally understood.

"Should I shoot him now, then?" Kino asked.

Hermes was highly disappointed. Very much so.

"If you do that, the bat's going to crush Elias!"

"Oh, right. That would be dangerous."

Said the most dangerous person in the vicinity.

The demon threw its second pitch.

Thud.

Another powerful strike.

"..."

Elias did not budge.

"Elias..."

Sitting on the bench, Sara looked around at Elias in the batter's box, and at all the other teammates around the diamond.

She took a deep breath.

"Do your best~♪ Elias~♪ Lalala~♪ Do your best~♪ Everyone~♪"

She began to sing. She was cheering them on.

Japan's greatest songstress was singing her heart out.

"Don't lose~♪ Elias~♪ Lalala~♪ Don't lose~♪ Everyone~♪"

The lyrics and melody were improvised. It was a humble song.

"..."

Elias looked more serious now than ever before.

He didn't even blink as he stared at the demon's form.

The third pitch.

It was a true demonpitch. Maybe as fast as 600 kilometers an hour.

"There!" Elias squeaked.

The bat cut through the air—

—and hit the ball.

"I'm a club member, too!"

Elias put strength into his bat-arm. Refusing to lose to the speed. Refusing to lose to the weight. Believing that he had the power.

CLAAAAANG!

It sounded like a gigantic bell had been rung in the school grounds. The ball flew.

Elias's desperate line drive flew straight at the shortstop monster.

"NO!" "It's right to the shortstop!" "It's going to catch it!"

The *kuroko* cried out in unison. but the ball shot straight through the monster as it reached for the ball. It had reached out a little too late.

Sssshhh. The monster turned to ash, but the ball flew past and rolled into the outfield.

"It's a hit! Run!" Hermes commanded.

"*Wakatta!*" Kino replied in Japanese, and slid into home plate! The score is tied!

Detective Wanwan followed, stepping on third base and running straight to home! That's two more runs for the Take Action Now Club!

And as for Samoyed Mask,

"AAAAAARGH!"

He was making a run for home plate. The left fielder monster threw at the catcher monster.

Oh? The demon pushed the catcher aside. It wanted to catch the ball and get Samoyed Mask out personally.

"Hah! A challenge, is it?"

At that moment, Samoyed Mask became a shining gust of wind.

With his white cape aflutter, he shot toward home plate.

Thud.

The demon caught the ball. It looks like Samoyed Mask is done for. Was his effort in vain after all?

"Ahahahaha! Take that!"

He soars! Samoyed Mask soared into the air.

He rose higher and higher into the sky like a lone swan.

This is on a completely different level from what Shizu did in the sixth inning. Samoyed Mask wasn't flying—he was *soaring*!

A lone white knight was gliding through the air, drawing a graceful arc.

His cape fluttered in the wind, and the sun glinted off the apple on his head.

"Ah..."

Kino looked up.

"..."

Detective Wanwan, too.

"You'll do well to engrave this into your eyes. The knight of justice soars through the air! Look, no hands!"

Samoyed Mask's smile glided gracefully in the sky.

He can fly!

He can fly!

He can fly!

And just as he dropped down to home plate,

"Guoh."

The demon waiting on the ground tagged him in midair.

"Out!"

"Huh?"

You soared too high. What did you expect when you took dozens of seconds just to land?

"Th-that idiot!" Kino cried. She couldn't not.

After the hit, Elias ran as fast as he could to get as far as possible.

He tried to get to third base from second while Samoyed Mask was in the air, but—

"Guoh!"

The demon tagged Samoyed Mask out and threw to third base. It was a smart play.

"Agh..."

Poor Elias floundered between third and second base, before finally being tagged.

He plodded back, deflated.

"I'm sorry."

Kino shook her head.

"What are you talking about? That was an awesome hit! We scored two whole runs!" She said encouragingly.

"I'm sorry." Said Samoyed Mask.

"That's what you get for being so greedy!" She snapped.

Two outs, no one on base. The score was 10 to 9.

The Take Action Now Club had taken back the lead, small as it was.

Kino was up again.

"All right. If I make it to base again, we can add Elias to the lineup and get more runs!" She said, confidently taking the batter's box. "All right! Just *try* and pull off another base on balls!"

It's a little sad to see that Kino is totally fine with something underhanded, but they had to get more runs at whatever cost. The warriors of justice would fill the bases and Elias would get in a hit to earn them more runs.

"GUOHH!" The demon suddenly howled. Then,

"What?"

Every monster save for the catcher gathered at home plate.

"Huh?"

Were they going to fight? Kino quickly took a stance. But the seven monsters completely ignored Kino, walked behind the catcher, and had the umpire stand aside as they clung to the catcher's back.

"What's going on?"

The result: A very long catcher composed of eight monsters lined up in a row. It was probably the longest catcher ever. Hello, world record.

The umpire stood behind it. He was quite far.

"Play ball!"

But I guess he doesn't care.

"Hm... what are they planning?" Kino wondered. "Oh well. Give it your best shot!"

She clutched her bat.

Now that there was no one on defense, Kino could feel free to leap at the ball like earlier that inning. With the empty diamond behind it, the demon wound up.

It pitched.

Kino was blown two meters backwards.

The ball hadn't hit her.

"Strike one!" The umpire called from a short distance.

"Wh-what just happened?" Kino gasped, getting to her feet. Her warrior of justice-mode uniform was covered in dirt.

Let me explain. Just as Kino made to hit the ball, she was blown back as though something had pushed her. It was hard to tell *what*, but it was quite shocking.

"1300 kilometers an hour." Hermes said calmly from Kino's belt.

"What?"

"The speed of the pitch, I mean."

"Wha?"

Kino returned to the batter's box and took a good look at the catchers.

"No way!"

The ball was in the glove of the monster at the very front. It was smoking because the friction from the throw had heated up the ball to the point that it was burning the glove.

In other words, the monsters had come together to catch the mach-speed ball. Kino had been flung back by the shockwave.

"Damn it! There's fast, and then there's just plain teleportation!"

The ball returned to the demon. It immediately pitched again.

"EEK!"

Kino was flung back.

And the third pitch.

"ARGH!"

Kino was flung back.

That's three strikes. Kino was out. It was time for another batter.

"They got me! Dammit, we're only leading by one run." Kino complained, putting down the bat and returning to the bench.

Samoyed Mask's teeth glinted.

"It's all right. We're still winning."

Detective Wanwan agreed.

"Yes. As long as we prevent any runs in the next inning, we will be victorious."

Sara continued to sing.

"Do your best, everyone~♪ I have faith in you~♪ I'll cheer you on from here~♪ Lalalala~♪"

Her voice was clear and lovely. It was like listening to a musical.

"I'll join the defense, too! Please let me in!" The tiny Elias piped up, showing more determination than most boys his size. If he could hit a pitch like that, getting hit by one of them probably wouldn't kill him.

Looking around at her optimistic allies,

"..."

Kino quietly shook her head. As though deriding herself for her weakness.

Then,

"All right! We just have one half-inning left! Let's do our best!"

Yeah!

The team punched the autumn sky. It was halfway through afternoon.

Some people were watching the Take Action Now Club through a monitor.

The feed from the school's security cameras switched to another view.

On the screen was the baseball team led by the demon. Astonishingly, they were huddled together as they roared for team spirit.

"It looks like they're both going to go the distance." Chako-sensei said from behind.

They were in a clubroom near the back of the school.

They couldn't see the grounds in person because the main school building was in the way, but several security cameras conveyed the ongoing game to a 65-inch television.

And the people watching were—

"Totsugawa-senpai... you kept going, even after turning into a demon..."

—Yuri and the baseball team.

Yes. After taking cover, they were gathered together by Chako-sensei to watch the game from the clubroom.

There was juice and snacks on the table, courtesy of Chako-sensei. Most were emptied—it looks like the team was busy.

"Whether you laugh or cry, this is the bottom of the ninth. The game's almost over." Chako-sensei said firmly.

"Waahhh... Heh heh heh."

Hey, you don't need to do *both*.

It was the bottom of the ninth.

Batter 7 was up first from the demon's team.

"Hmph. So I just get two monsters out, and the demon-senpai's next..."

Kino grinned confidently on the mound.

Elias was at first base with a glove on his hand. Samoyed Mask was the catcher, and Detective Wanwan was the shortstop.

They could not allow a single run. That would be a tie, and as there would be no extra innings in this game, the Take Action Now Club could not emerge victorious. And if the demon's team hit a home run, the game was over.

Losing the match wouldn't *kill* anyone. Kino could simply turn back the demon after the match.

But Kino and the rest of the Take Action Now Club(exception: Chako-sensei, who skedaddled early on) wanted to win, fair and square.

They had to keep fighting for victory until the last of their hopes was extinguished.

That was also a courtesy they had to show to their opponents.

"All right, let's do this. Whether we laugh or cry, this is the last inning."

Kino fixed her cap and looked at the batter. There was something like satisfaction in Kino's eye.

The monsters were now somewhat adjusted to Kino's gun-supported curve balls. Even when she waited for the last millisecond, they stubbornly refused to be defeated. They had hit four home runs in the previous inning.

Then—

Kino whipped her arm forward.

Then she took out a gun. Instead of the Desert Eagle, she grabbed an SR-25 sniper rifle, with the extra firepower that rifles offered.

The target: her own pitch. Kino quickly took aim and looked into the scope.

In less than a second, she calculated how to alter the pitch so the batter couldn't hit it.

"There!"

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

Shell casings flew into the air. Four 7.62mm rounds chased the ball.

And they made contact. The pitch shifted.

Thud!

"Strike one!"

"All right!"

Kino punched the air, taking a victory pose. She hadn't changed the course of the pitch. She shot so she wouldn't have to. In other words—

"I see. You shot the center."

"That's right."

Kino had shot the very center of the ball and accelerated the pitch in four stages.

"Excellent thinking, Mysterious Kino. Feel free to continue your curve balls and speedshifters. Don't worry about accidentally shooting me." Samoyed Mask said, throwing back the ball.

I won't, Kino thought.

"And defeat them all."

Once the baseball team's finished, you're next, Kino thought.

<Strike! OUT!> The umpire's call rang from the speakers next to the monitor.

"Oh!" "That's one out!" "She got us!" "It was so close, too!"

The baseball team was captivated by the match.

The eight players and the manager were staring a hole through the TV, not even touching their snacks anymore. Chako-sensei had already left the room.

On the screen, Kino pitched and shot with the determination to allow not even a single hit. She was fighting a very close match indeed.

"Dammit..."

One of the team members said. He was the one who had been catching Totsugawa's pitches until not too long ago.

Then, he turned to the others.

"Guys—"

The last stage of the game was at its last stage.

"Hah!"

Sweat dripping down her face, Kino pitched with all her might, then quickly sniped the ball with the SR-25 on her back and altered its course.

This time, it would curve from the edge of the box to the center.

Kino fired eight rounds for this shift. She had to shoot at locations the altered pitch had not yet gone, all with microscopic precision. It was like threading a needle from across the diamond.

"Yeah!"

But Kino managed to do it. Again with the billiards foreshadowing.

Thud!

She had put heart and soul into the throw. The ball landed right in Samoyed Mask's glove.

"Strike! OUT!"

That was a strikeout, folks. The monster didn't even have the chance to swing. Yet the umpire's call was absolute.

"Sweet!"

That's two outs.

One more out, and the Take Action Now Club would be victorious.

The next batter was—

"Grrrr.."

"You're finally here."

The demon that was once Totsugawa.

Kino and the demon faced off, 18.44 meters between them. Yes. It was the very distance of victory, spanning the gap between the mound and home plate.

On the mound was the ace, Kino. The food-loving warrior of justice who had defended the mound all alone.

In the batter's box was the demon. The responsible captain with a weak stomach.

It was the bottom of the ninth, with two outs and no bases filled. There was just a single-run difference in score.

"Here goes! WHOAAAAA!"

With a battle cry, Kino whipped the ball. Then, she fired eight shots in a row—she would make the ball curve from the upper edge of the strike zone to the lower edge.

"GUOHHHHH!"

The demon swung with all its might, the bat slashing through the air.

CLANG!

The curve ball bounced off and flew over the baseball team's bench. It landed on the school building and totaled a concrete pillar.

"Foul!"

That's strike one. But,

"Th-that was close..."

Beds of cold sweat dotted Kino's face. Kino had seen the moment of impact—the ball had only narrowly been a foul.

"Grrrr.."

The demon shot her a glare.

"Heh. Not bad."

Kino glared back. Then, she switched magazines on the SR-25. The new one was fully loaded with twenty shots.

"Say, Kino. You should try missing on purpose." Hermes suggested. Kino tilted her head.

"Huh? Miss on purpose? Upwards? Downwards? Left? Right?"

"No, no. I mean you should try and throw for a ball. It would be great if the demon swung for nothing. You don't have to limit yourself just to strikes."

"Right. Just like those times when Chako-sensei stuck out her glove really far."

"Yeah. It's a good strategy."

"Okay. But I'm not gonna do it."

"What?"

"Even if the demon never swings once, I'm going to strike him out. That's what it means to fight like a man."

"But—"

"You should know something, Hermes. Parfaits and sundaes are both the crown jewels of dessert, but there's no clear difference between them. There's theories that say they have different origins, or they take different amounts of time to eat. But there's nothing definitive. And it's nothing to care about, either. And since I ate mountains of both, I know what's important. That they're both delicious. So maybe that's more than enough?"

"I see. So what does that have to do with baseball?"

"Nothing, really." Kino replied. Then, "HERE GOES!"

Kino wound up. Her target: The lower edge!

"HAAAAH!"

She pitched.

"There!"

She fired.

This time, she used more firepower. Twelve shots, to be precise. Such a feat was only possible because she was wielding the SR-25, an automatic sniper rifle.

The ball accelerated and curved from a higher position, just skirting the strike zone.

"GUOHHH!"

The demon swung.

CLANG!

The desperate hit echoed across the grounds.

The shockwave from the impact rattled every window in the school building. They would have shattered to bits if they hadn't been replaced with bulletproof glass.

"No!"

As Kino turned, the ball cut the wind as it flew straight toward the left.

There was nothing that the Take Action Now Club's defense could do. Nothing but watch.

"Please be a foul!"

And at that moment, it drove itself like a meteor into the ground right before the home run line. The earth shook a little.

The ball was just on the foul line on the third base side. Which side of the line was it on?

If it was inside, it would be a valid hit. It would be impossible to dislodge the ball from the ground before the demon circled the pitch. The running home run would tie the score.

If it was outside, it would be a foul. That would make two strikes.

The third base umpire rushed over.

And after checking the newest crater on Earth, he raised his arms.

"FOUL!"

"Whew..."

Kino breathed a sigh of relief.

"I told you it would be risky to be so aggressive. That ball was only a foul by a matter of microns." Hermes said.

Incidentally, the umpires had all gathered to fill the crater before the game resumed. Please hold.

"So throw a ball next time."

"Hm. So what should I throw for the final pitch?"

Kino's not listening at all.

"I'll give it an extra twist. The only thing that packs a bigger punch than a 7.62 *and* is capable of repeat fire would be a beast that uses .50 BMGs. And I just happen to have a Barrett M82A1 that's perfect for the job!"

Assured of victory, Kino turned to the demon. There was a uselessly confident look on her face.

"..."

The demon shut its mouth. Kino spoke again.

"Hey, hey, hey, whazzup? You scared, batter? Hey, hey, hey!"

"..."

Man, that's just cruel.

"What? Why?"

It was a tense battle of spirits. Though Kino seemed to be cornered, she was mentally cornering the demon.

"Grrrrr..."

Oh! The demon just pressed its left hand to its stomach! It looks like it's in pain! Its stomach must be hurting! It looks like his mental fortitude hadn't been changed by the influx of demonic energy.

Once the crater was filled, the umpires returned. It was almost time to resume the game.

"Now's my chance!"

Kino would use any means necessary to win.

"I'll finish it with this pitch! Here's to a strikeout!"

She relentlessly assaulted the demon with her confidence.

"Grrrrrrrr..."

The demon leaned forward, its hands on its gut. Oh, the home plate umpire returned and took place behind Samoyed Mask.

"Play ball!"

The game resumed. They were at two outs, no balls, and two strikes.

"Now! Now—"

Kino had just convinced herself that, though merciless, she should end things then.

"Demon! Do your best!" Someone called.

"Huh?" Kino looked up.

Not 'Do your best, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino'? She was very confused. Talk about self-centered.

"Demon! Give it your best shot!"

"Don't lose!"

"Nail that one!"

"You gotta be strong! Put your back into it!"

"The coach ain't here, pal! It's gonna be all right!"

"Have confidence! You can do it!"

"You have to be calm!"

"Demon! Demon! Demon!"

Finally realizing that she hadn't heard wrong, Kino turned to the source of the voices.

"N-no way!"

It was the baseball team's bench.

"We have faith in you!"

The baseball team and the manager pushed the monsters away from behind the bulletproof glass, cheering wholeheartedly for the demon in the batter's box.

"Heh... a rather passionate crew." Samoyed Mask grinned, his teeth glinting.

"Hmph. Who needs friends?" Detective Wanwan muttered cynically.

"I'm a little jealous." Elias confessed from first base.

"Friends, huh?" Sara smiled from the opposite bench.

"GUOOOOOOOH!"

With a howl, the demon returned to form. It raised its head and held up the bat.

"GRRRAR!"

And as though daring her to pitch, it shot Kino a frightening glare.

If Kino's aura was cloudy and black, the demon's aura was clear and pure like the color of the sky!

Uh, who's the protagonist here again? It's kind of confusing if you just look at Kino on the mound and the demon in the batter's box.

"Heh! I know. This is the last one!" Kino roared back, and took out a massive rifle about 1.5 meters in length and 12 kilograms in weight. It was her Barrett M82A1.

Pulling the heavy lever, Kino loaded the powerful rounds and pulled the gun onto her shoulder.

Then,

"This is..."

She slowly traced an arc with her arm,

"The pitch of my soul!"

And threw.

It was a blistering pitch. The fastest one of the day.

And,

"HAAAAAAH!"

Kino took aim.

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

Ten consecutive shots. Rounds powerful enough to shoot down a helicopter made contact with the ball, one after another.

Up, down, right, left, acceleration, up, down, acceleration, acceleration—

The ball moved on an impossible course.

"GUOOOOOOH!"

The demon swung.

Without so much as a hint of hesitation.

CLANG!

According to a man in the city of Wakkanai, Hokkaido, very far from Kanagawa prefecture—

"I thought they were ringing the bell at the local temple."

"No way!"

The demon made the hit. The demon hit Kino's pitch of the soul.

The ball rocketed toward Kino's feet.

"Ah!"

It was too fast for even Kino to react to. Her left hand just missed it.

Rolling between her legs, the ball hit the mound directly—and thanks to the low angle, it bounced high up into the air.

“Whoa!” “He did it!” “Go!”

Every member of the baseball team was on their feet.

The black ball soared into the sky. Higher and higher it rose toward center field.

At the same time, the demon broke into a run. It made it past first base. What incredible speed.

Kino turned.

“It’s too late...” She whispered, gritting her teeth.

At this angle, the ball would fall just narrowly in the outfield—but the demon was bound to get an inside-the-park home run before that.

It was the tying run.

At least, that’s what everyone thought.

“...”

Until a little girl raised her head near the center field.

“Ah! That girl!” Detective Wanwan cried.

“EEEEEEK!” Samoyed Mask shrieked.

“Oh!” “Oh!” Sara and Elias said in unison.

And—

“Ti!” Kino called her name.

She was twelve years old, and had short white hair and emerald-green eyes.

Her face was blank like a doll, her expression inscrutable.

She was a highly skilled bomber girl whom Kino had encountered several times. Her name was Ti.

Upon closer inspection, it was clear that she had a baseball glove on her left hand.

“Are you going to join the defense? But—”

The ball was tens of meters above her head. It was impossible, everyone thought. But then,

“...”

Ti took out a Mk 2 grenade from her backpack and pulled the pin.

And more. She scattered many grenades around her, all missing their levers.

The grenades, of course, exploded. In unison.

If Ti was just a girl who liked grenades, she would have died then and there. But she was different. She was a master of the Chain Blast Technique, which entailed creating multiple explosions to create a perfect safety vacuum in the center.

And this time, the explosions were not just a shield.

“Sh-she’s flying!”

Just as Detective Wanwan pointed out, Ti was launched into the air like a rocketship. Whoosh.

It was a technique borne of impossibly impeccable calculation.

And when the girl bounced up to the highest point—

There was the ball.

Thud.

Ti grabbed it.

The demon had already passed second base and was nearing the third. One monster was spinning its arms round and round. So fast that it looked like it was going to fly off.

“Throw it home!” Detective Wanwan called to Ti, who was still in midair. But when he turned to home plate,

“...”

He was thunderstruck.

“WAAAAAAAAAH!”

Samoyed Mask, the catcher who should have held his ground to protect the base and catch the ball,

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Was running away in tears.

“I’ll get it!” Kino yelled, and made a mad dash for home plate. It looks like she’ll get there before the demon does.

“...”

The girl in the air threw back to home.

But it was clearly a weak ball.

"It won't make it!" Detective Wanwan growled. But at that moment, Ti threw again. this time, she threw multiple grenades.

Chains of explosions shook the air, each and every blast focusing the energy into one precise point to give the ball a devastating push.

The ball was now zooming back to home, directly at Kino. Not even a Major Leaguer can manage a throw like this. I hope you didn't need me to tell you that.

"Sweet! Thanks, Ti!"

Kino's eyesight was more than enough to see the ball shooting toward her like a bullet.

"Kino! You have to touch the demon with the glove that you're holding the ball with! And don't drop the ball afterwards, either!" Hermes cried.

"Got it!"

The demon passed third base and stampeded toward home plate.

The ball arrived before the demon. *Thud*. It landed in Kino's glove.

"The moment of truth!"

Kino ran. Straight toward the demon rushing her way.

"GUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

The demon refused to slow down.

The Take Action Now Club swallowed.

And,

"Take that!" "Run!" "Tackle her!" "Finish it!"

As the baseball team watched,

Kino and the demon's silhouettes overlapped.

Like two beasts going head-to-head.

THUD.

There was a powerful impact.

The crash happened so quickly that no one could see what had happened. But—

"AAAAH!"

Kino was the one sent flying.

She was thrown from home base to the Take Action Now Club's bench.

"Urk!"

And she crashed into Samoyed Mask, who had fled in tears.

"Waaahh—gurk."

Launching him out of the grounds, Kino bounced in the opposite direction. Again with the billiards foreshadowing.

"Huh...?"

—over Elias's head as he watched, slithering across the diamond—

"Gah!"

—crashing into the baseball team's bulletproof shield, then bouncing again—

"Agh!"

—to finally land on her face on the school grounds.

The demon, meanwhile, had run clear past home plate after throwing Kino, and crashed into a fence hard enough to shake the ground. It broke through the fence, fell, and stopped moving.

"Which one?" Wondered Detective Wanwan.

"Wh-which one?" Wondered Sara.

"Oh... which one is it?" Wondered Elias.

"Out?" "Safe?" Wondered the baseball team.

Ti, who had set off a grenade underfoot just before hitting the ground to soften her landing, replied—

"You'll see."

—and turned away.

"..."

The home plate umpire strode up to the baseball team's bench.

"Yaaaargh... yakisoba..."

He went up to Kino, still lying in a daze on the ground.

Everyone was silent.

Solemnly, the umpire said,

"Pardon me, miss."

He flipped over Kino like an othello piece.

Flop. He looked into the glove on her left hand.

The black ball—

"Hm."

Was still secure in her grip.

"OUT!"

The call resounded across the autumn sky.

"YES!" "We won!" "Wow!"

The Take Action Now Club celebrated.

"Argh!" "Oh man!" "So close!"

The baseball team grumbled.

The long battle was over. Game set.

It was a wonderful match. It was one for the history books, if it could go down in them in the first place.

And the umpire, who was vigorously waving a checkered flag, noticed something.

"Fwah... can't eat anymore... seconds please..."

That even as Kino continued to talk in her sleep, there was a revolver in her hand.

And he also noticed—

—that there was a faint wisp of smoke rising from the muzzle.

Finale: Monday
~a Sequel~

The next day. It was a Monday.

After school.

"Wow, this is good."

The Take Action Now Club was in their clubroom of the day, the A/V room. They could hear the distant sound of construction on the swimming pool, and the repairs being made to the pillars of the school building.

Kino was in her school uniform. She relished a *yōkan* she picked up from the table.

Around the table were Shizu, Inuyama, Sara, Elias, and—

"Yesterday was incredible."

—Chako-sensei, wearing a blazer vest and skirt.

Kino complained viciously.

"But you broke your man-to-man promise about having dinner at that restaurant yesterday!"

In case any of you are confused, no, neither Kino nor Chako-sensei are men.

"Of course I couldn't keep the promise. You didn't finish the game."

"Urgh..."

"I suppose we couldn't help things when the demon showed up, but it was Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino and her cohorts who played for us. Oh, and Elias? You did a splendid job. And all on your own! I heard all about your efforts!" Chako-sensei said, sounding very confident for someone who ran for her life like a cartoon character.

"Yeah, Elias! You were amazing! You were so cool!" Sara agreed, her eyes sparkling.

"Huh? Oh, um. Thank you." Elias replied shyly. Damn it, no more of that mushy romance stuff.

Kino could not reveal her identity; she had no choice but to back off.

"..."

And that was why she devoured all the *yōkan* Chako-sensei brought as the day's snack. Munch munch.

"Sensei." Shizu said, raising a hand.

"Yes, Shizu?"

"What happened to the baseball team? We were all rescued by the warriors of justice yesterday, but—"

Inuyama and Kino nodded.

"Yes." "Yeah."

After the game the other day,

Kino was actually there, in the guise of the warrior of justice Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino. When she recovered from the impact of slamming into the demon,

"Huh?"

She saw the baseball team carrying the unconscious Totsugawa together, taking him to the nurse's office.

Eight people lifted him into the air, walking in formation. Following behind them was a teary-eyed girl with a ponytail, her hair swishing slightly as she walked.

It looked a bit like a suspicious cultists' ritual, but it's good to see that everyone is safe.

"Now that my job is done, I should be getting back to, uhh, Planet Justice!" Kino improvised awkwardly to Sara and Elias.

"Thank you, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino! We couldn't have done it without you!"

"Thank you! You were amazing!"

Kino left Sara and Elias as though in escape.

When she glanced over, Samoyed Mask and Detective Wanwan had also disappeared from view.

Kino undid her transformation behind the school building and returned to being plain old Kino.

"RESTAURANT!"

She went back to the grounds to fill her empty stomach.

"Oh, Kino-senpai! I'm glad you're safe. The *kuroko* just got word from Chako-sensei. Apparently we're ending club activities now because of the demon attack. Sensei is headed for the nurse's office. She says we have to go back to the dorms because it's dangerous. The *kuroko* are going to take us back." Sara explained.

"N-no..." Kino trailed off helplessly.

End flashback.

"Totsugawa from the baseball team returned to human form and woke up in the nurse's office. And like all the other cases, he has no memories of being a demon." Chako-sensei explained, chuckling. "The baseball team is singing his praises, swearing to follow their captain forever."

That was natural, since they'd seen him put up such a valiant fight even in demon form.

Although this didn't guarantee that the baseball team would get better, the game was sure to become a wonderful memory in their scrapbook of youth.

"And for some reason, Watanabe-sensei the supervisor didn't come out to school today. Is he transferring, maybe? Who knows? The baseball team might get a new coach." Chako-sensei said, seemingly ignorant to how scary she was sounding. No one knows just how much of her words were true.

But Kino didn't care one bit about that business.

"I see. It's a good thing the baseball team's gonna be all right."

"In any case, I wonder about these cases of demonic temptation. Who is doing all this, and why?" Chako-sensei suddenly wondered. Sara and Elias stared.

'Who knows?' Thought Hermes, who was hanging from Kino's belt.

"I don't know the answer myself, but I can say with confidence that they will never defeat the warriors of justice." Shizu said. Spoken like a true honor student.

"Although no one can truly say what is demonic and what is justice." Inuyama added, shooting Shizu a meaningful look.

And finally spoke Kino, the protagonist.

"In any case, I think we should be opening the next box of *yōkan*."

Incidentally—

On the way back home after the game, Totsugawa was finally left alone with Yuri.

"Thank you! I love you too, Yuri!" He cried, suddenly hugging her.

"What?"

The bewildered Yuri punched him hard, but that was another story.

Sometimes, love blossoms from awkward misunderstandings like this.

Although it might not.

Chapter 8 End

Chapter 8.5: Out of Focus

~Introduction~

When the girl stood by the window of one of the school's club buildings,

"They're practicing really hard."

The baseball team was warming up for the game.

They were just having another Sunday practice. Not knowing that the team would soon enter a match against a crew of weirdos(Re: The Take Action Now Club), the girl forcefully closed the curtains.

"Let's get to work."

She was a fifth-year student at the academy—a girl in her second year of high school.

Her trademark was her long black hair, which went all the way down to her back. She always wore black tights with her uniform skirt—just as she did today.

Her classmates often said things like, "*The girl who never shows her legs*", "*She must have a dragon tattoo*", or "*She's got a jet engine equipped underneath*", but she didn't care.

She was in the archive next to the school library.

Things like sex ed textbooks, foreign photobooks filled with nude pictures, and almanacs full of photos of corpses filled the room—things that couldn't really be left lying around for everyone to see.

But what interested the girl was the color printer in the room. It was a powerful machine that could make prints as large as size A3+.

Why did she need the printer? It looks like the laptop and camera she just took out of her backpack will answer that question.

The camera was a rough single-lens reflex. An Olympus E-5. It's a rather expensive model. A thick, heavy telephoto lens capable of zooming from 50 to 200 millimeters was equipped to the camera.

Yes. She was going to print out the pictures she had taken, using school supplies.

She was originally part of the photography club.

When she first started at the academy, there were nearly a dozen students in the club, and they had their own room.

They had a wonderful club office in the second building of the school, which was equipped with computers for image processing, a scanner that could transfer film to the computer, and the latest printer on the market(at the time).

But for some reason, they never received any new members; students graduated one after another, and the girl was finally on her own this year.

Because clubs were not officially recognized without at least three members, the photography club was disbanded.

Naturally, she lost the clubroom. The scanner and the printer broke down as though on cue. Even the supervisor, who loved photography, had to transfer away because of family issues.

So all that was left was the Photography Lovers' Club. It had a single member, and almost no one in the school knew of its existence.

But there was a silver lining to this cloud.

The girl had always been part of the library club, which allowed her access to the archive key and the printer in the archive. Maybe she was happy with that—the girl never tried to recruit anyone else into her club.

And for the past half year, she had been working away on her own.

The weekend was the perfect time. Because she lived near the school, she could walk over, check her photos on her laptop, edit bits here and there, then print the ones she liked.

Food and drinks were forbidden in the archive, but she sipped tea out of a large thermos she had brought.

"Hm. This one's nice. It's got such a cute expression."

She was just printing out a photo of a cat she had shot while taking a stroll on Enoshima. But the distant cheers and clanging from the baseball match in the grounds were suddenly replaced by screams and shouts.

"Huh?"

She stood. She did not forget to pick up her trusty E-5. The batteries and memory card were always set to go. She even left the lens cap off most of the time.

She cautiously approached the window and peered outside.

"...It's a demon!"

There was a demon howling on the mound in the baseball diamond. She could also see the baseball team running for their lives.

There was only one thing to do.

"It's picture time!"

Yes. Holding up her E-5 and zooming in as much as she could, she caught the demon in her sights. Although she was still too scared to open the bulletproof window.

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

Because she had it set to burst mode, the camera continued to take pictures as long as she held down the shutter. She had also set the focus to automatic.

She stopped shooting for a moment and examined the photo she had taken on the screen. The demon was clearly visible.

"Wow!"

This was a scoop. Many people had seen demons in the past, but no one had ever successfully taken a picture of it(except for the school's security cameras).

She could title the piece, 'The Demon on the Grounds' and submit it to her favorite photography magazine for a prize! Maybe she'd get prize money and a new memory card! Or maybe she should take it to the press for a special payment.

Her nostrils flared as she fantasized about the possibilities.

Suddenly, a deafening roar sounded overhead. And before she knew it, a large, white object was hovering over the grounds.

It happened so suddenly that, rather than assume it was the man-made vehicle called a helicopter, she began to fear that a flying demon had suddenly appeared.

At the time, her camera was pointed away from the demon. She was so shocked that she forgot to take her finger off the shutter; the camera continued to snap away in burst mode.

The grounds were obscured by dust, and the helicopter slowly began to fly away. Then the wind carried away all the dust. It had only taken several dozen seconds.

"That gave me a scare..."

Finally restored to calm, she turned back to the grounds. Oh? Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino was already facing off against the demon.

She had no idea where the warrior of justice had come from. Maybe the helicopter? Either way, she was fast.

"Maybe I should get away. I'd hate to get caught up in this mess."

The students at this academy were all trained to escape in the case of a demon attack. Now that she had the demon on camera, she had no reason to stay. The girl had no intention of playing wartime photographer.

She quickly packed up her laptop and prints, locked the door, and left.

'I guess I should stay away from the school today.' She thought to herself, leaving out the back door.

When she returned home, she hurried back to her room. The rest of her family had all gone out, and the house was deserted.

"All right! I'd better back up my data."

If she didn't make backups, she might end up tragically losing all her photos. She quickly opened up her laptop.

Then, she inserted the memory card she took out of her camera.

"Yes!"

It was there. The demon. The girl brought up the photos onto the screen, one after another.

They were pretty good photos, even to her eyes.

Though it was a lucky coincidence, the exposure was just right; and not only that, the demon's ferocity, malice, and subtle hint of pathos were all clearly conveyed in the picture.

It was the platonic ideal of a demon. If such a thing existed.

Thrilled at the scoop, she carefully saved the photos onto an external hard drive and began to delete the photos she had accidentally taken in the dust storm kicked up by the helicopter.

She deleted one picture of brown dust after another.

"Huh?"

That was when her finger stopped over the delete button.

In one photograph was a girl in school-issue sweats, standing in the dust storm. She was just a tiny figure in the corner. Zoom in.

"Oh?"

The girl in sweats was also wearing a gun belt around her waist.

The student had heard of the only girl in the academy who went around with a gun belt—the one who was more than enough. That alone, however, would not pique her curiosity.

But when she moved on to the next picture—

"What?!"

Her eyes turned to dinner plates.

The girl in the photo was clearly glowing bright blue, just like those glow-sticks people wave at concerts.

"Wh-wh-what is this?!"

The girl with the gun belt was glowing, but our poor photographer did not understand why. Was the gun belt girl actually descended from firefly squids?

Taken aback, the girl went to the next picture.

"..."

And she figured out the truth.

The third picture cleared up everything.

The girl in the photo was no longer glowing.

The girl in the photo was dressed differently.

"No way..."

She was wearing a school uniform. And a pair of sweatpants under her skirt.

"This is Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino!"

Just as the girl concluded, the figure in the photo was the school's mysterious celebrity.

'Calm down and think.

'There's a girl in sweats and a gun belt on the grounds.

'Then, she starts glowing suspiciously.

'Then, Mysterious Bishoujo Gun Fighter Rider Kino appears.'

She finally understood.

"Talk about one heck of a scoop..." She mumbled.

And from that deserted room—

"Hey, did you find something interesting? Can I see?"

—came a voice.

Not taken by surprise at the voice, the girl replied,

"I think I just shot something incredible..."

Chapter 8.5 End